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with
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PROLOGUE

"THIS is a little bit of heaven, Zinnia, my dear!"

Peter Clancy stretched luxuriously in the sun-drenched sand. The quiet waters of the Gulf, like a shaded green and blue scarf with the sheen of Liberty silk, curved around the narrow end of the island. The high heads of the palms bordering the bank above us moved with a faint rustle and swish in some current of upper air.

"You'd better accept Craig's invitation and stay on at Honeymoon Isle for another week," I suggested but without much hope. "After all it's obvious he and Rowena don't let us get too much in their way."

Peter's red head turned in my direction and he grinned boyishly. "True for you, my pet. But my time off can't be stretched further than day after to-morrow, when you can picture me once more the subtle sleuth, pussy-footing around in some messy crime or other——"

"And having the time of your life. Don't pretend, Peter," I said severely.

He sighed gustily and rolling over propped his elbows in the sand and with his chin in his hands turned a quizzical eye in my direction. "I'm very tired of crime and wicked people," he said. "If Wiggar would let me retire I'd do so to-morrow."

"Oh, no," I exclaimed hastily. "You wouldn't, really. That would be dreadful. Think of all the good you do. I mean it's so fine and noble to fight for the cause of Justice."

"Sure." He wrinkled up his nose and laughed. "Brings us both in a little bunch of the wherewithal, too, at times. Eh, my dear?"

"That's a mere by-product, Peter, and you know it!" I may be an old war horse of a newspaper woman but I can still blush.

Peter laughed outright and leaping smoothly to his feet stretched out his hand to me. "Let's jump into the water again. It's getting too hot for comfort," he said.

"Oh, I don't know," I yawned. "I've seen it hotter than this in Maine . . . where the Saco River winds . . . and they grow all that marvellous green corn." I felt too lazy to move.

Peter was looking out to sea. He said rather slowly: "I didn't know it ever got really hot in Maine. The vividest picture I have of that section is deep in snow and ice, with brisk northerly winds and the mercury crawling down into its little bulb for shelter."

"Br-r-r. If you talk like that I won't need a swim to cool me off," I said and added curiously: "Whatever made you go to Maine in the winter?"

"It was partly business," Peter answered rather shortly. "If you don't want a dip in that lovely water you'd better turn over. You're done plenty brown on that side."

"Well," I said, stirring tentatively. "I'll come, if you say so,

but I'm perfectly comfortable and I've really felt it hotter in Abbotsville, Maine, believe it or not."

Peter turned sharply. "Abbotsville ?" he repeated.

"That's what I said. It's a tiny place; little more than a crossroads with a general store and a one-room country school house. Don't tell me you ever heard of it."

"It's about fifteen miles east of Fairfield. You pass through it to get to a smallish lake called Kearsarge." He was looking down at me with a very odd expression on his plain, clever face.

"Of course." I sat up hastily. I don't know why the unexpected reference to a mutually familiar place always seems a matter of interest to both persons involved. "There used to be splendid fishing in the lake. Small mouth bass. Great sport. Haven't fished there for more years than I like to count. But I can't imagine you fishing through the ice, Peter. I thought better of your sporting instincts than that."

He let the taunt pass. "There are lots of lakes in that section. But you are referring to Kearsarge, aren't you ?"

"I sure am," I replied. "It's not big like Sebago on Upper Keezar but it's lots prettier and more fun—or was before those expensive city guys built on the other side of the lake. I don't know what it's like now."

Slowly Peter sat down beside me. He seemed to have forgotten the sun. His face had taken on a queer grimness. "You haven't been up there lately then ? You don't know any of the more recent people ? The Arnold Enfields ? They built on the east shore of the lake a good many years ago, I think."

"Oh," I exclaimed, glancing up hastily. "Wasn't there something about them this last winter—in the papers ? The Enfields ? Something in connection with that tragic accident—I mean the death of Donald Goodhue, the painter. Drowned, wasn't he ? A splendid artist. I knew him, but only slightly. . . . Was terribly busy when it happened and didn't pay much attention. . . .

"I say, Peter !" I scrambled to my knees. "You were there ? It was an accident, wasn't it ? You weren't called in because there was a suspicion of——"

Peter's gaze was fixed on some far unseen horizon. He spoke in a low almost bitter tone. "Arnold Enfield is undoubtedly one of the wealthiest and most powerful men, politically, in the State of Maine, though he makes no splurge and stays pretty well behind the scenes. They were able to keep almost everything out of the papers and to hush up the whole business, more or less—but too many people know that there was cause for suspicion and some day 'Murder will out.' It was entirely against my advice——"

He broke off sharply. "Come up into the shade, Zinnia," he said, lifting me to my feet. "It's a story without an ending. One of the cases that I didn't pull off and somehow it seems odd that you

should mention that tiny place just now. It's only a flyspeck on the biggest maps and yet it has dodged in and out of my thoughts. . . ."

His voice trailed off and he said no more until he had settled me comfortably against the curved root of one of the great sky-aspiring palms. Then he asked abruptly: "Where did you stay and whom did you know in Abbotsville?"

"I don't believe I know any of the summer people that live there now," I answer hastily, for the suggestion of the story of one of Peter's adventures set me all agog. Even a failure on his part, unprecedented as it was in my experience, would be a tale worth hearing. I went on quickly: "You wouldn't know my friends, the Charlie Nortons, because they gave up their camp when Donald Goodhue put a motor-boat on the lake. He was the first to build on the other shore. Of course we saw a little of him. Everybody knew everybody else in those days. But that was a long time ago."

Peter said: "They still call that little place on the west side of the lake the Norton Cottage though it reverted to the Rolfs, I believe. Originally part of their farm, wasn't it?"

"Yes," I said. "We took our dinners at Jared's and I boarded there when I went up again a few times after the Nortons left."

Peter turned his head and looked me full in the face through narrowed eyes. "There's something queer about this." After a minute he spoke in a low voice. "Or I'm getting fanciful. . . . That was unfinished business up there for me. Nothing more I could do. And I was called back to town. . . . Funny you should know the place—and some of the people. . . . I wonder——"

I could see that he was weighing something in his mind. There was silence between us for several minutes. The pellucid water whispered softly, its lips against the sand. From somewhere beyond the scrub that sheltered the cove there was a whir of wings. A great buzzard rose and flew with heavy competence along the shore, his flapping feathers black against the sky and his wicked bald head clearly outlined. With a kind of revolted fascination we watched until the ominous creature disappeared beyond the farthest trees.

Peter sighed and stirred uncomfortably. "Those birds are worse than crows, and crows are bad enough," he murmured. "There was a flight of them I remember. . . ." He hesitated and then went on quickly: "It will be a jolt to your ideas about me, I'm afraid, my dear, but I think I'll risk it. You'll be interested, if only because you know the place, and it will be a relief to my mind to talk it out with a sympathetic listener, than which I know no better or more satisfactory in all the world——" I beamed and he added cruelly, "unless it might be Wiggar and he was in it all along."

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PART ONE

PETER'S STORY

CHAPTER I[1]

"I HARDLY know where to begin," said Peter.

"Begin at the beginning and go right on to the end," I urged.

"There is no end," said Peter. "At least no end that's satisfactory to me. . . . But to go back to the very start. . . ."

As a matter of fact it was only a little over three months ago, just after the holidays. I had completed, as I fondly thought, a rather unimportant case of robbery and was sitting with my old partner, O'Malley, at his desk in our New York offices, telling him about the pay-off.

"So Enfield gave you a handsome—er—honorarium, eh, Peter, me lad? And that's the end?"

"Well——" I hesitated. "Yes, and no. We found Mrs. Enfield's jewels all right. They'd been pawned for less than half their value. Both she and her husband identified them and none were missing. A perfectly routine job for us. No interest whatever, so far, of course. Old Israel Jacobson said he remembered the man who put them in pop, though he claims never to have seen the fellow before. According to the description he must have looked like that clever movie actor. What's his name? Basil something. Never mind. The well-known hawk-like features of fiction: dark hair, worn rather long, moustache and small imperial; old-fashioned soft black Windsor tie and rather seedy dark clothes; wide brimmed black hat. Limped and carried a stick."

"Humph. Easy disguise," remarked O'Malley.

"That's what I thought, but Jacobson was sure it wasn't. Naturally he could have been lying. But why should he? The story the thief told was clever enough and we weren't making any trouble for the old pawnbroker. His reputation is pretty good, you know. Doesn't seem as if he'd accept stolen property if he knew it, not at this late date. Enfield believed the whole tale and reimbursed the old fellow for the entire amount of the loan."

"And you let him, Pete? Merely on Jacobson's say-so?" O'Malley frowned. "How did you know what sum was advanced? You aren't getting careless, are you, son?"

[1] Peter did not tell me all this at once. It took the rest of his three days of grace for me to dig out all the details. He declines to sponsor descriptions and conversations; which isn't really fair for I've written it all down as nearly as possible in his own words, merely arranging the continuity and, for obvious reasons, changing all the names and places.—Z. H.

"Not in this instance." I guess I was frowning, too. "The pawn-tickets turned up and old Israel had stated the amount correctly."

"The pawn tickets turned up. Just like that!" O'Malley's clever old face broke into one of his funnier grins. He only said: "How come?"

"The tickets, in a plain envelope, were slipped under the door of the Enfield's New York apartment in Seventy-second Street. Mrs. Enfield herself found them there when she came in from shopping."

"Oh? She did?"

"Yes," I said, very offhand. "It happened just right. We had Jacobson's statement that morning. So we verified same and Enfield came slap down with the cash at once."

"Very decent of him," O'Malley said, looking up at me pretty sharp. "If that's all there was to it. . . . I should think he'd want you to go ahead and try to find the thief or at least the chap that stuck the pawn tickets under the door. Didn't the elevator boy see him? Or someone else around the place? It was in daylight, of course, if the lady was out shopping."

"Nobody saw any such person as the pawnbroker described. Could have been a district messenger, though the elevator boy is sure there wasn't any. However, there's only one elevator and there's a fire escape at the back as well as front stairs around the elevator shaft. It's not a new apartment, nor very grand. The Enfields come from Portland, Maine. Very large ducks there. They just keep the New York apartment for occasional visits, though they've had it a long time."

"Then the thief could have had an attack of remorse or a change of heart or something and returned the tickets with his own fair hands." There was a slight accent on the word "fair" but I didn't rise to the bait. O'Malley went on: "You'd better break down, son, and tell me what you meant by saying 'Yes—and no,' just now. You're still to go on looking for the thief? Is this check partly for favours yet to come? It's pretty sizeable for the work you've done so far."

O'Malley usually looks over the tops of his steel-rimmed spectacles. He never looks through them except on special occasions. He had lifted his grizzled head and was gazing at me with shrewd suspicion.

"Maybe you won't be too surprised," I said softly, "when I tell you there is no further interest in the thief discernible."

"No-o-o?" The old man pursed his lips. "Then ain't this big cheque a bit o' blackmail stuff on your part, son?"

"Not quite," I answered with a certain hesitation. "At least I have a fancy that I may earn it—and something over, perhaps. . . . Arnold Enfield seems to have taken quite a fancy to yours truly, believe it or not. He asked me to join them and a few friends at dinner night before last and we had quite a time. We went around

to several of the less incandescent hotspots and all got quite palsy-walsy. Mrs. Enfield still dances divinely and we hit it off in great shape. I told them at dinner that, as Louise Fontanelli, Mrs. Enfield was my very first love. I was careful not to say how young I was when old Mr. Gregory took me to see her dancing with Reginald Star. Do you remember them, O'Malley? They were wonderful! A little like the Astaires but even better it seems to me as I look back. I really did fall for her, and hard. Used to haunt the stage door just for a glimpse. Then dear old Mr. Gregory sent me off to school and I never saw her again until—until I was called in to find her lost jewels. . . . She carries her age marvellously. You'd never dream she was even thirty-five, but her son, Max, must be over twenty. He said he was going up to Maine, too. It's to be a quiet family party. . . . But they really seemed to want me—Arnold was especially cordial—really insisted, and I thought I'd better accept. Wiggar thinks they're very good style and is quite keen about the whole thing. . . . Maybe I need a vacation."

"Humph," said O'Malley with an odd, twisted grin. "I see. When are you going?"

"To-morrow evening, I think. They say it's more beautiful than ever in January. Snow on the mountains but the lake ice good and clear. You don't mind if I take a few days off, do you, old man?"

O'Malley shivered. "Gr-r-r! Not if you don't ask me to go with you, my boy. Where is this freezing Shangri-la?"

"It's on a lake somewhere in the foothills of the White Mountains, as I understand it. About fifty miles north of Portland. They're all going up to-day. I'm to meet them at the station in Portland day after to-morrow morning and we'll drive in from there. . . ."

I could see then that O'Malley's suspicions marched with mine. Arnold Enfield had been keen to get back his wife's jewels and to find out who stole them, until the pawn tickets turned up. After that his interest suddenly slackened. He became big-hearted all at once. Altruistic. "After all it hadn't cost too much to recover the stuff, and what was the use of hounding some poor devil that was probably desperate for money. What did we know about other people's temptations? . . ." That kind of thing. And it wasn't like him, somehow. Or at least I had sized him up quite differently.

He's a big man, heavy in the shoulders, and will have to do himself less well if he wants to keep any trace of his once girlish figure. More or less of an athlete, I should say, but at fifty-five is beginning to soften up to some extent, though he still claims to be and is, as I found later, pretty good at winter sports. Aside from that, and betting on races, he appeared to be a conservative business man, with a keen eye to the main chance and not in any way likely, so far as I could see, to think of setting up a dairy for the dispensing of the milk of human kindness.

Then why did he suddenly break out in a heat-rash of sympathy for a thief who had done him dirty, so to say? Did he suspect that his wife had taken this indirect means of getting some cash without applying to him? Certainly there was a fishy smell about the opportune return of the pawn tickets. But it seemed highly improbable that she, or any woman, had put the jewels up the spout. Old Jacobson was shrewd and his description of the man who pawned them was clear and unusually detailed.

So, if Louise Fontanelli was up to tricks, she must have had an accomplice. . . . As I mulled it over, in the train going up that night, I found that I always thought of her by her stage name. An odd trick of the memory of an adolescent stage-struck kid. I believe I must have had some elements of taste even in those days, for she was still very lovely; almost as beautiful as ever, though I dare say it took her longer. Her colourful, reddish-brown hair might have been touched up, and the make-up on her rather generous mouth didn't do the allure of it any harm, but her figure had all the grace and slenderness of youth and her wide blue eyes looked as candid and innocent as those of the Sistine Madonna.

It may be that I was suffering from a calf-infatuation-hangover, but it certainly was difficult to imagine ugly, shifty thoughts behind that clear gaze. When I danced with her she seemed carefree frankness itself. . . . Was she so sure of her husband's affection that she had no fear of unpleasant consequences? Always assuming her duplicity.

But if it was a trick, it wasn't an awfully smart one. And that, too, would more or less fit in with her character, perhaps. Who could tell? She had been a promising young actress as well as a dancer but that needn't necessarily mean that she was long on grey matter.

Wasn't there a rumour that she and Reginald Star were married, once upon a time, I asked myself then? Radio was in its infancy and there was no Walter Winchell in those days. In any case it must have been a fleeting connection. Max Enfield was her son and he was at least old enough to be married. I could judge that for myself, for he and his wife were included in that dinner party. . . .

And who else was there? The Russells, Mr. and Mrs. Not specially interesting, I thought. He was by way of being a sport; handsome in an unattractive sort of way. At least he didn't appeal to me to any extent. His wife had a pointed face like a mouse and that colour of hair. The way Mrs. Enfield flirted with Nelson Russell—"Nellie" to her—was too exaggerated to be real, but I thought Mrs. Russell didn't like it much.

And how did it strike Arnold? For the life of me, I couldn't be sure. He played the devoted husband throughout without a hint of unkindness or impatience. If there was some restraint in his manner it was no more than one might expect from a man of affairs and a native of Maine's rock-ribbed coast. I had taken it for granted

that the expensive bracelets, necklace, and so forth we had recovered had been his gifts; he had showed no hesitancy in redeeming them for her; all of which seemed to indicate that he was no piker but a truly indulgent husband and so remained.

Then why the sudden enthusiasm for a casual acquaintance; a private investigator like myself, who had been called in professionally? Wiggar certainly must sit up nights thinking of ways to do my appearance justice, but Enfield's tailor is no amateur and I couldn't flatter myself that I owed his invitation to join an intimate party of friends in the wild winter woods to my personal charms alone.

However, what else was there? If he was as much in love with his wife as he seemed to be, and yet suspected her of selling him short as far as the jewellery was concerned, why didn't he have it out with her, man to man? Did it go further? Had he suspicions of some definite person? Was he too deep—too self-contained—to risk taking me into his confidence? And yet wanted my professional services as a witness? Or what?

As O'Malley said, the cheque he insisted on my taking was more generous than the occasion warranted and I had all but refused it. If his manner had been even a shade different, I might have thought it a species of bribe to make me forget that we had found no one who could guess how the loot had been spirited away from his wife's dressing-room in the apartment in Seventy-second Street, that the return of the pawn tickets had been equally without witnesses, and that it was she herself who had found them, so conveniently placed.

But if he had wanted to make sure I'd drop the whole case and think no more about it, why did he at once ask me to string along, first to dinner, followed by a gay evening, and then, apparently on the spur of the moment, this invitation to the country? He had been drinking, it's true, but not to excess. And he had called me up in the morning to say that he was sending down a reservation and a family ticket for me to use (it seemed he had some connection with the Boston-Maine) and to make sure I understood about the train schedule, where and when we were to meet and so forth and so on. . . .

If he hadn't overpaid me in the first place I might have been inclined to let my vanity lap it all up. As it was, I meant to proceed with caution. It would be interesting, in any event, to note whether or not my coming was a surprise to Louise Fontanelli; and whether, in her character of Mrs. Arnold Enfield, she would welcome a private sleuth into her home or otherwise.

CHAPTER II

WELL, as it turned out it was hard to say how many welcoming arms were outstretched to receive me. It was Max who met me at the Portland station. The others had gone on up the day before.

He was delighted that I had been up early, had breakfasted on the train and could go on up to camp without delay. We went out at once to a handsome Packard that was parked at the rear of the station.

"Your man can get in the back seat," he said and added in a lower voice, "I guess Dad told you he'll be welcome. We aren't too long on servants up here in the winter."

I nodded. That was the arrangement. Mr. Enfield had learned about Wiggar in the course of the inquiry into the late theft and had graciously included him in the invitation. "I can see he's the sort that would make himself useful," the elder Enfield remarked, "and I've no doubt the cook and housemaids will welcome him with joy." Knowing my Wiggar I had no misgivings on that score either and if it should turn out that there was any undercover motive in my invitation I could use another pair of eyes and ears in the servants' department, possibly to some purpose.

Max Enfield drove very fast, not to say recklessly. The highway was a through route and kept open by the State but it was slippery in spots. There often was a thaw in January, he explained, and the recent mild weather had been of unusual duration but the wind from the north had frozen things up again, which accounted for the ice in the road.

"Some people think they can have everything their own way without paying a price for it," he said as the car skidded dangerously, "but it's not so, Mr. Clancy, and it never will be. The freeze makes the road dangerous for bunches of farmers around here but my father and all his friends are glad because the lake ice is fine again except in a few places and we can have the races that were planned for to-day. Did he tell you about them ?"

"I don't think so," I replied. "He asked me if I liked skating——"

"And you do ?"

"Oh, yes. Though I don't have an opportunity very often."

"I suppose this is a—a sort of vacation for you." He glanced aside at me with, or so I imagined, a hint of speculation in his restless blue eyes.

"Oh, yes," I agreed heartily. "But I hope it's understood that I'm not good enough to do anything but watch the races from the side lines."

"The skating race, you mean. Of course you could enter if you wanted to, or Wiggar could. It's a free-for-all party that my father gets up every season. All the farmers and other native talent, with their wives and daughters, are invited. As many as like to compete in the races, and he puts on a big buffet luncheon between the skating and the ice-boat event. It's a wonder he didn't tell you all about it. It's his idea of making character with the local hoi-polloi."

"You don't sympathize with it ?" I could tell by his tone that he didn't.

A portentous frown came over his immature face. "No, I don't," he said brusquely. "This lord of the manor stuff doesn't go down

with the working classes. They take advantage of it, naturally. It's the best they can do to get a little of their own back, but the natives here are dour and proud and resent it as they should. At least some of them do. Take Jared Rolf, for instance. But he knows which side his bread is buttered on and that same wouldn't melt in his mouth. All of them act as if my father was a prince and he gets a great kick out of it. For my part——"

He launched into a half-baked socialistic tirade and I didn't feel that I needed to listen further. After all it doesn't make a man a noble being to be poor any more than it does to be rich, and an uneducated person isn't on that account any more likely to develop plans for the betterment of human conditions than a person of high attainments, so far as I can see. Frothy arguments that only stir up class and race hatreds——

My own train of thought and Max's monologue were both broken into by a skid more violent than before. It was almost a complete right-about-face. With some skill he brought the car back into the road and pointing in the right direction, but Max climbed down precipitately from his high horse and paid more attention to his driving from there on.

It was nice country we were passing through, not exciting but picturesque enough. The hills were still some little distance off when Max called my attention to a sign that I had seen before at intervals along the road.

"There's something," he said, harking back, "that might cause the idle rich to figure a few things . . . 'The Maine Desert.' Ever hear about it?"

Not seeing any possible connection and dreading a new flood of eloquence I could only murmur a polite disclaimer. The young enthusiast at once became didactic though he continued to drive more carefully.

"It's one of the local sights hereabouts," he said. "Started only about fifty years or so ago. First a fire that killed the grass roots—just the way a war kills everything in sight—and then the sand began drifting in—the way the poor drift from place to place. See what I mean? Nothing to stop them—or the sand. Here the wind blows from the east and south-east nearly all the year. No northerly winds except occasionally in the winter when the sand is frozen hard. All spring and summer and fall it blows inland, eating up vegetation, farms and woodland. Burying fences, landmarks, houses. Irresistible as the tide of human ignorance and poverty. . . . We turn off here."

Phew! I was glad of the break. The young man's morbid metaphors had enough of truth in them to be distinctly depressing. The narrower road began a winding ascent through rolling country where great strong pines stood up grandly above rocks and mounds of snow. The world isn't all drifting sand, thank Heaven. My spirits began to rise and so did those of my young companion. Soon

the Presidential Range came into view in blue and white against an almost cloudless winter sky. The air was cold but dry and invigorating. Once or twice we crossed the Saco River where it winds through upland meadows, passed through the country town of Fairfield and a small hamlet that Max said was called Abbotsville and presently turned off the state-maintained highway at a decorous sign marked PRIVATE ROAD. PLEASE DO NOT TRESPASS.

"I insisted on that 'please'," Max Enfield remarked virtuously as we drove along between ranks of white birch and pine. "After all, the farmers around here have owned land and fished this pond for generations. The least we can do is to grab stuff off with some degree of courtesy, I should hope."

We had made good time and it was only about half after ten when we reached the house. The road wound in from the back and it was not until we rolled into the ample sloping clearing on which it stood that I got my first view of Lake Kearsarge. It was a sight so lovely that it nearly took my breath away. Possibly it would be as beautiful in summer but I could hardly believe it. The rambling picturesque house faced the west. Below it the lake curved away on either hand, its smooth, translucent surface shiny as glass in parts but with a sort of mat finish in some of the bays and inlets along the irregular shores. On my left, looking down, I could see a rather small cottage with a large studio light in one end of the roof.

"That's my place," said Max with no indication of enthusiasm.

"Oh? Are you an artist, by any chance? I didn't know——"

He broke in petulantly. "I paint," he said shortly. "Let it go at that."

I didn't understand then why he turned and glared northward along the lake shore where a rocky promontory jutted far out into the ice. . . . I guessed—later. . . . I did not know at that time that the large cottage, easily distinguishable even at that distance among the high spreading pines standing out black against the snow, was the studio of the internationally famous painter, Donald Goodhue.

Inside the house there was considerable excitement and confusion and our entrance was met with very casual and offhand greetings. Arnold Enfield looked like a different man in a very sporty winter outfit that made him appear younger and more flexible. His expression was quite changed and he moved among the motley group surrounding the huge fire-place with a word for everyone and a hot drink that he said was strictly inside the Maine laws but smelled more cheering than that to me.

It was several minutes before I saw Mrs. Enfield. I don't know where she came from but suddenly she was there before me. I'm sure she was startled and was, for a minute, at a loss. Perhaps it's my vanity that makes me believe that she couldn't have forgotten who I was. After all my red head is pretty conspicuous—and I had

dined and danced with her only three nights before—besides, there was the matter of the stolen jewellery . . . if it was stolen. . . .

She recovered almost instantly. "Why, it's Mr. Clancy," she said, holding out her hand with a very pretty gracious effect of spontaneity. "Arnold didn't tell me you were coming, but it's a great pleasure to have you, I'm sure. I'm sorry we're in such a turmoil, but it's just one of those rare days when a minute's peace is the principal thing we have the least of. Max! Here, Max, you show Mr. Clancy where his room is. Let him take his choice of anything that's decently made up. Everybody's so busy this morning that the whole house is a revolting mess, but never mind. I'm sure you'll find some usable place in the north wing. We'll get an extra fire going there if you need it, but don't stay up there now. The skating race starts at eleven-thirty sharp and you ought to have hot drinks before you go out. Did you bring warm things with you? Plenty of fur coats in the back hall. It's really not very cold out but you aren't used to it perhaps."

She started away as a man's voice hailed her from a distant door, but turned back to say: "Galoshes, Max! Has he galoshes? Or—, oh, my goodness, Mr. Clancy! Perhaps you skate. If you do, be sure to get into the race. It's lots of fun and you'll be surprised—— Yes, Nellie, yes! I'm coming. Wait!" Her lovely head twisted from side to side distractedly but there was no trace of actual anxiety apparent in her all-embracing smile. "There are real drinks in the library if you want one. Max will fit you out with skates. I must go——"

Just as she darted away, the big door at the west end of the hall flew open and a tall slender man stood on the threshold, silhouetted darkly against a black and very white background. A cold blast accompanied him as he stepped forward, leaving the door for someone else to close. When he moved nearer and into a stronger light, by one of those odd tricks of the subconscious, a name I had been trying to think of off and on ever since my talk with O'Malley came back to me. That actor whose performances are all so finished and well worth seeing even when he plays what he once called the part of a "Meanie": Rathbone. Basil Rathbone. That was the person suggested by the old pawnbroker's description. . . .

Max Enfield's hand was on my arm. "Come on upstairs, Mr. Clancy and I'll show you your room. There isn't too much time if you don't want to miss——" He did not bother to finish the sentence but, turning his back on the company below, began hurriedly to mount the wide staircase.

CHAPTER III

I PAUSED on the first landing. "Who was that?" I asked, for there was something odd in Max Enfield's expression and manner that roused my ever nagging curiosity.

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He turned with an obvious air of reluctance and watched the newcomer who had made his way straight to and through the group by the fire-place and was even now bending down with exaggerated courtesy to kiss the hand of a strikingly beautiful young woman whom I hadn't seen before.

"That's the great Donald Goodhue," Max answered in a voice that lost nothing of its antagonism by being held down to little more than a whisper.

"The painter?" I exclaimed. "What's he doing here?"

"Humph," Max growled, starting angrily up the stairs. "You might ask him."

"Getting solid with a girl he'd like to paint?" I suggested, following.

"Oh, he's been making sketches of her already." He threw this over his shoulder as he went hurriedly along the wide upper hall and began opening doors at random. "Take your pick," he said with some return of his cordial manner. "These three aren't occupied. Not made up either, confound it! But your man can get anything he wants from the housekeeper—— Oh——" He broke off. "Someone has already——"

I recognized my luggage, placed in the corner of a delightful room, with windows on three sides and a capable-looking fire-place; also I had no trouble in identifying the voice that came softly toward us down the hall.

"Thank you very much, Mrs. Quincy. This will do nicely. If we need anything more I'll know where to come."

"That's right, Mr. Wiggar. Anything I can do——"

I grinned at Max. Wiggar had picked out the best room in the North Wing and was already in solid with the housekeeper.

It took only a few minutes to change into the winter outfit that Wiggar had provided, partly in advance and subsequently supplemented from the well-stocked sports room on the ground floor. I was anxious to get back to the company assembled for, in spite of the lavish hospitality and apparent gaiety, I felt or imagined an odd undercurrent of strain and unexplained antagonisms that whetted my curiosity and promised possible light on the reason for my having been included in this very much mixed party.

I thought Arnold Enfield must have been watching for me, which was only natural as I was the latest guest. He came quickly to the foot of the stairs and somewhat to my surprise, instead of introducing me to those standing nearest, he led me through the throng around the fire-place and directly up to Donald Goodhue who was still talking earnestly to the beautiful girl whom he had first addressed.

He didn't seem at all pleased to be interrupted. Enfield, of course, presented me to the girl first. "Miss Constance Dangerfield, who does us the honour of teaching the young native idea how to shoot."

I thought quickly: that explains her. She doesn't belong to these farmers exactly, but neither is she a "high flier at fashion." I learned afterward that she was a native of Portland, that her parents were both dead and that immediately upon her graduation from Wellesley the preceding spring she had accepted the position of schoolmistress in Abbotsville and had entered upon her duties early that fall.

She was even more lovely at close range, I discovered. Her manner was nice, gentle and unsophisticated, but the glance of her wide grey eyes was direct and intelligent. I liked her at once. She only repeated my name but her voice was low-pitched and without the nasal twang that sounded all about us.

Enfield's hand on my elbow was rather insistent as he turned me away from Miss Dangerfield and introduced Donald Goodhue. "You know his pictures, I'm sure, Mr. Clancy. He's a very celebrated painter."

There was an edge to the unnecessary compliment. It was unmistakable. Arnold Enfield shared some of his son's obvious dislike of this man. . . . Then why had he rushed me over to make the painter's acquaintance? Was it a tip of some kind which I was supposed to catch on to? Or did the older man merely want to break up the *tête-à-tête*? It might have been either for he abandoned me to Goodhue's and the girl's mercies and dashed away to speak to a tall whip-cord type of Maine farmer of middle age with a lean, sardonic face that would find it hard to admit that its wearer was having a good time.

"Are you joining the race, Mr. Clancy?" Goodhue had to tilt his head back to look down his nose at me, but he managed it.

"No," I said. "I'm a hopeless amateur. In fact I haven't been on skates for years."

"Too busy?" The man was giving me a thorough once-over through half-closed eyes.

I had taken particular notice that Arnold Enfield hadn't mentioned my profession when he complimented the painter on his. There didn't seem any point in doing it now. I just made some casual remark and started a conversation with Miss Dangerfield. After a few restless minutes, Goodhue said: "Better come into the library and get a drink, Connie. It's going to be cold outside——"

"Oh, but I'm in the race." She smiled at both of us. "Mean to win if I can and I'm sure a drink wouldn't do anything to me but wobble my ankles. Thanks. But don't let me keep you—or Mr. Clancy."

I liked that girl a lot, but I was even more interested in her admirer—if he was that. I followed him into the library where quite a company was assembled. Arnold joined us after a minute with the dour farmer in tow. Introductions followed all around. I learned that the Maine man's name was Jared Rolf and seemed to remember that I'd heard him mentioned before; concluded it must

have been by Max, and was interested because the man was so obviously a product of that rocky environment. However he mellowed surprisingly after a couple of stiff shots of some very excellent scotch and became expansive.

"Arnold knows how to put on a pretty show," he said with a leathery grin and a blow that made Enfield lurch. "He ain't one of these here tight wads like some of the city folks and he don't stand on no ceremony with his constituents. We're all for you, Arn! You should ought to run for Senator and I'll bet you will sooner or later."

"He isn't going to judge the race this afternoon you know, Rolf." Goodhue put in his oar with a tantalizing smile that I imagine was part of his general attitude.

"Just the same I'm betting on your boat, Jared," Enfield announced hastily. "I've seen her perform before and I think you have a swell chance to win."

"Sure." Laughing, the painter turned to me. "I still vote in New York, Mr. Clancy," he said, "so I don't count, but you'll see. My boat will win. I give you the tip freely. If you're betting I advise you to put your money on the *Flash*."

Enfield tried not to sound annoyed. "Looks don't count for everything," he said. "When you see the *Flash* you'll be tempted, Clancy. But Jared and Tom Burton have done a fine job on the *Clipper*."

"Tom ain't done much," Rolf interrupted. "He's got a lot of newfangled notions but I know sailin', both water and ice, and the *Clipper* is mine and all mine, see? And I'm the lad that can sail her, come snow-ice or glare!"

Donald Goodhue's lip curled. He turned contemptuously away from the boaster. "It's a wonder to me you aren't betting on Max's boat, Arnold," he said in a friendly tone as smooth as silk. "It surely is as pretty as paint can make it and he's been helping Jared lay out the course so it ought to be—er—a good one——" (So far as their boats are concerned, he might have added though his grin made the spoken words unnecessary.)

I saw Arnold flush and dark blood welling up in the farmer's weatherbeaten face, but before either could speak another man pushed in beside our host and cried lyrically: "Who's betting on what? Where, when and how? What's the limit and where's the best bookie in this fancy set-up? Introduce me to your new friend, Arnold. Red hair, huh? Bless me, you can always have fun with a red head! Mr. Clancy? Nice to know you. Come on over and have another drink!"

Doctor Foster Overton. . . . I knew something about him. A very distinguished New York surgeon who had suddenly retired some years before—given up a very lucrative practice and since had entirely disappeared from public view. His present condition made the whispers that had gone the rounds seem more probable than we

had then believed. His round red face and loose-lipped smile seemed jovial enough but there was a haunted look in his eyes.

"It's the *Clipper* for my money," he called out in a loud voice, turning his back on Donald Goodhue. "Any takers? Have you seen the boats, Mr. Clancy? Well, anyway I won't take your money. You should bet on Jared's *Clipper* to win, I'm telling you. Come on over and have another drink."

It was obviously a formula that he had repeated far too many times for his own good. I was sorry for him even then, but not enough to make me let up on him—later.

I thought he already had had plenty to drink, but he was so insistent I had to take a quick one with him before we were all called out to view the skaters who were lining up for the morning's event.

It was, surely, a beautiful and exhilarating sight. The course lay to the south where the smooth ice shone between shores of rock and dark sweeping pines. Bright red flags marked the stakes. A huge bonfire blazed at the near end of the starting line and, as we all plunged down to it through the shallow drifts of snow that covered the lawn, a shot rang out and the race was on.

As I stepped out on the edge of the ice I felt a pair of glasses thrust into my hand. "Isn't she *beautiful*?" Arnold Enfield's voice murmured close beside me, though it seemed as if he spoke to himself.

I put the glasses up and followed the direction of his gaze. At first I had eyes only for the slender dark figure of the man's wife and was thinking that Louise Fontanelli had lost nothing of her willowy grace in spite of years, when another slim form came into view close behind. The young school-teacher in scarlet cap, white sweater and full dark blue skirt was running her hostess a close second. A motley crew of gaily dressed contestants followed, gaining here and losing there, but Louise was ahead when they rounded the first flag and lined out on the broad end of the triangular course.

Suddenly I felt a hand plucking at my elbow and a woman's voice exclaimed, "For heaven's sake, who the dickens is that? Let me look, Mister Who-ever-you-are!"

I resigned the glasses to the clutching hand but not before I had put myself in the way of answering her urgent question.

"His name is Wiggar," I said complacently. "He came up with us this morning."

"A stranger!" The woman exclaimed so bitterly that I looked quickly down at her.

She was a short, rather stout middle-aged person with a sallow though not unpleasing face. Her ungloved hands were rough but strong and capable. She was dressed in a worn but neat heavy black coat, which was just short enough to show the tops of wide flapping black galoshes.

"Bad luck to him if he wins this race," she burst out vindictively.

"It's a big money prize probably and Connie's heart is set on getting it. Why do these rich city folks have to butt in——"

"Mrs. Enfield is still ahead," I remarked placatingly. I couldn't help feeling a wicked elation over Wiggar's surprising performance. I didn't even know that he could skate. He told me afterwards that he had learned in Canada the winter his late British master, Captain Lord Deeping, spent on his ranch there, and had kept it up when opportunity offered ever since.

The woman beside me set me back on my heels. "Mrs. Enfield is only acting as pacemaker for Connie Dangerfield," she said scornfully. "You'd ought to know that if you know her at all. She ain't the kind to grab off prizes at her own husband's party. You watch 'em as they come in on the home stretch! They're all dropping behind, farther and farther, praise be! Only that skinny little feller in the derby hat!" Suddenly her voice rose.

"Come on Connie, dear! Keep up your courage, lass! That's the girl! Don't let him pass you! Don't let——"

They had rounded the second mark and were coming down like the wind. I had to choke down a cheer as Wiggar shot past the girl in the red cap and came abreast of Louise Fontanelli. They were neck and neck for a breathless minute. Then I saw her turn her head with a startled movement and I knew she was speaking though they were much too far away for me to hear. Suddenly she stretched out her hands to Wiggar. Instantly he swerved, caught the tips of the lady's fingers and with a beautiful swoop that brought a gasp from the spell-bound onlookers, the two were out of the race, cutting elaborate figures farther and farther to one side.

The roar that went up when Constance Dangerfield crossed the starting line far ahead of the rest was only a continuation of the outburst that had hailed the surprise of the previous performance. She was flushed and her eyes were dancing but she hardly seemed to hear the hearty congratulatory speech with which Arnold Enfield presented a cup full of silver dollars, or to be conscious of the cheering of the crowd about her. Laughing and dishevelled, she pushed her way across the ice in my direction. I thought, confusedly, that she was going to say something to me about Wiggar's self-effacement, but I flattered myself in vain.

"Take care of this Mrs. Rolf," she said breathlessly to the woman who had commandeered my glasses and who had been jumping heavily up and down in her excitement. "Tell Tom——"

I didn't hear the rest for the girl's voice had sunk almost to a whisper. I caught a gleam in Mrs. Rolf's eyes as clutching the prize to her breast she put up the glasses again to watch the young schoolteacher glide away to join the two experts who were still, the one solemnly and the other with joyous abandon, cutting figures in the gleaming ice.

CHAPTER IV

I MET Wiggar when, after describing a wide circle around the outskirts of the crowd, he came in off the ice.

"Oh, Mr. Peter, sir," he said as soon as he saw me, "I hope you don't think it was an inexcusable liberty——" He moved his hand in a small gesture that somehow took in the whole of the preceding event. "I confess," he went on contritely, "that the temptation of this beautiful ice was too much for me. Besides there was quite an assembly in the servants' hall: two chauffeurs belonging to the cottagers here and Mr. Goodhue's man, Meadows—also British, sir. The chauffeurs and several of the maids were joining the race. You haven't seen the housekeeper, I suppose, Mr. Peter, but she is really quite presentable."

"Trust you," I said, grinning.

Wiggar's expression of a particularly well-bred snow man did not change. He went on apologetically: "There was a good deal of talk. Robert, the Russell's chauffeur, thought skating was rather a Yankee accomplishment. In fact he boasted that he could win the race hands down, as the saying goes. Meadows and I exchanged glances and he immediately drew me aside. After a little argument—for the honour of the old country—well, I allowed myself to be persuaded. And I really was almost forced to do my best, sir, for Robert, as you may not have noticed, was close behind Miss Dangerfield and pushing her pretty badly at one time. I hadn't understood the situation, either, in regard to Mrs. Enfield and thought it wasn't quite cricket for the lady of the house to win, so I forged ahead rather blindly, I'm afraid. Then, of course, she told me she was only pacing Miss Dangerfield (which I might have seen if I'd been less excited) and naturally I joined her when she left the course."

Anything calmer than Wiggar's wooden exterior I have yet to witness. "Naturally," I echoed, and refrained from adding, "and quite in character for you," though my face might have expressed the thought that was in my mind. I only said: "I don't believe anyone here will feel that you took a liberty. And you must know that I don't."

He said: "Thank you, Mr. Peter," and having carefully brushed the snow from a convenient rock, sat down, as I turned away, and proceeded to remove his skates.

It must have been close on one o'clock when a policeman's whistle, blown several times in quick succession, called in all the gay company from around the bonfire and from the ice. Enfield introduced Sergeant Keyes, the state highway patrolman who was using his whistle for a more congenial summons than usual.

We all trooped in to find tables on trestles in the big living-hall and the long one in the dining-room groaning with a Smorgasbörd

that appeared adequate for twice the number of guests. The farmers, their wives and young people, were all mixed up with Enfield's guests and with the summer cottagers, a good many of whom had braved the cold to be in on what was, evidently, a yearly event. There were, also, a number of persons from Abbotsville and the county town of Fairfield, notably the sheriff, whose loudly expressed interest in and preference for the *Clipper* was easily explained since it turned out that his name was Rolf and that he was own brother to the man who owned and was to be skipper of that ice boat in the afternoon's race.

The keen air had made me ravenous and I found a place where I had a good view of the tables and also was able to witness a bit of byplay that afterward gave me food for thought.

Constance Dangerfield naturally had been the centre of attraction after her morning's triumph. Mrs. Enfield came in for notice in only a less degree. Wiggar was now austere and unapproachable, in proper metier, as he handed plates and served coffee at practically the same serene moment.

It had taken some manœuvring for Donald Goodhue to corral Constance in a corner, obviously preparatory to making her his partner for the ensuing meal. He was bending above her in a most flattering posture when Louise appeared in the opposite doorway. She glanced quickly around and I saw her face harden when she caught sight of them together. Her head lifted determinedly; she went quickly across, spoke a few short words, drew the girl's hand through her arm and advanced to the top of the centre table which was much longer than those around the room.

"Connie is to have the place of honour," she announced in a clear ringing voice, and with a smile that seemed perfectly genuine she added: "As they say on the radio, 'Let's give the little girl a big hand!'"

Everybody clapped and cheered. A good many rose to applaud. The girl's clear pale olive skin was suffused with blushes which became her well. A lean brown young man with an able reserved face appeared from somewhere, put the cup full of silver down before her and then vanished as quietly as he came.

I had purposely picked out a seat next to the woman who had commandeered the field glasses that I was using at the race. She seemed to feel that it had been an introduction and after asking my name was proceeding to enlighten me as to the occupation, relation and social status of various members of the company when this interruption occurred. Now she leaned forward eagerly.

"That's my boy, Tom," she exclaimed with a sudden softening of the voice. "My only son, Tom Burton. He's——"

I didn't guess then why she stopped.

"I thought your name was Rolf," I remarked idly. I was watching Goodhue whose speculative eye had followed Louise Enfield until she disappeared into the dining-room.

"Tom was five years old when I married Jared Rolf," the mother said in a different tone. "My first husband was Tom Burton, too, and Tom is as like him now as two peas in a pod. Steady and sober but full of the devil if his dander got up. Like Tom wanting to enlist first thing in this here war. He's colour-blind and they wouldn't take him. Besides, Jared needs him on the farm, planting time and harvest. But I'm just as well satisfied, you bet.

"Yes, I wasn't any older than Connie when my man died and left me with a little boy to bring up. For all that I believe in early marriages. Connie's a sweet girl, don't you think so, Mr. Clancy? Sure you do. Everybody must. She's only been boarding with us since she come in September, but I declare I love her like my own. Between you and me, she'll be able to use that prize money, not being too well fixed with only a teacher's bit of salary to go on. Wonder how much there is in that cup. Tom lifted it like it was heavy; but silver money weighs a lot and bulks, too. For all that Arn Enfield is no fool, everybody knows. He understands how we all feel about Connie already and I guess he picked her to win. Somebody told me that little chap that threw away his chance of winning is a valet or something. Do you know anything about him? Is that right? There he is now. Funny lookin' isn't he? But nice, somehow. You told me his name once. Wiggar? Sounds English . . . Oh, he is?"

She rattled on but I didn't pay much attention for several minutes after that. I don't know whether I ever told you that I once had an assignment that made it necessary to spend some weeks watching a man, a deaf-mute, in an asylum. I had to pretend to be a patient and, since it was rather boring, I put in the time learning to read lips. It's been pretty useful in spots—and sometimes quite embarrassing as you may imagine. Anyhow, at this point it proved to be very intriguing for Donald Goodhue, who had been drifting about looking superior and supercilious, suddenly encountered Louise Enfield and drew her off to the embrasure of a nearby window. The light on their faces was excellent and though no word of theirs could have penetrated the clatter of dishes and raised voices, I was quite well aware from the movement of his lips that the man was saying: "It's just as well that you came across, Louise."

Her beautiful eyes narrowed and she said: "Watch your step, Don. You're playing your luck too hard. I'm warning you——"

Someone called her then and she moved gaily away, once again the perfect gracious hostess, backing up her husband's ambitions, whatever they might be, with a charm that won many hearts, as could plainly be seen by the looks that responded to her every word.

She did not sit down until everyone had been served. Enfield, too, circulated genially among his guests, looking out for the comfort of all. It was a very mixed company and required a great deal of social tact to make the party click, but the two of them, with no help at all from the son, were able to pull it off in great style. I didn't

notice but two people who appeared not to be having a good time. Goodhue was frankly bored and Max Enfield didn't look happy. Perhaps his leftist-slant interfered with his appreciation of this kind of "patronage," or there might have been (I reflected afterwards another reason—or reasons.

He had a very pretty young wife who seemed to hang upon his every word, he had youth and good looks, plenty of money—at least his father appeared to have. . . .

The voice of the woman beside me must have ceased without my noticing her silence. Evidently her eyes had followed mine for she said shrewdly: "I guess Max is worried about the race this afternoon. Poor lad. His boat's smart enough, but he's no good at handling her and he won't admit it. If he'd let his mother sail her, he'd have some chance of winning. Mrs. Enfield is good and I don't mean maybe. So is Eugenia. That's Max's wife. They get out on the lake when Max is away any time the ice is usable and the *Arrow* behaves pretty well, but Max is kind of stuck up and stubborn and he's bound to lose the race for himself. I guess it's better that way."

She spoke knowingly and, not having had any experience with this type of sport, I began to ask questions, all of which she answered with a keen appreciation of her subject and a conciseness surprising in so normally voluble a person.

There were only three boats entered in the race, Mrs. Rolf informed me: the *Clipper*, the *Flight* and the *Arrow*, all to be skippered by their respective owners: Jared (her husband), Mr. Goodhue and Max Enfield. Doctor Overton had an ice boat but it was old and not very fast. There was another very obvious reason why he wasn't joining the race and I was pleased and a little surprised that Mrs. Rolf didn't allude to it by so much as a look in his direction.

"Your husband's boat seems to be the favourite," I remarked politely, but she shook her head.

"Jared might win if the breeze is light," she said, lowering her voice. "He's had a heap more experience than the other two, on water as well as ice. Ran away to sea when he was a kid and never got it out of his bones. Would be a sailor still if his father hadn't died and left him this big farm that brings in more than he could squeeze out of the sea, so he had to give it up. He's on the lake every spare minute, fishing sometimes, of course. Jared's a good skipper. I've got to say that for him. But Tom says his rig is wrong and the old-fashioned way of steering with a rudder astern is out of date. Naturally Jared won't listen, but Tom's had a good education and he's the best carpenter this side of Boston. I'm not prejudiced if I am his mother. And don't you grin like that at me, Mr. Clancy; he is, so, and anyone will tell you the same if you ask 'em."

"What about Goodhue's boat?" I asked. The painter was

leaning over Connie, offering her a cigarette which she accepted with a slightly self-conscious air. Wiggar had just poured her coffee. The meal was nearly over.

"Oh, his," Mrs. Rolf exclaimed with a sharp look quickly averted. "You'll see it. Has all the modern improvements. Expensive. More'n he has a right to spend, I should think, from what I've heard. He knows how to handle it, too." Grudgingly. "I wouldn't mind so much his winning this race if——"

She stopped abruptly. Across the room at a table entirely occupied by men, one had risen and was peering out of the window. A second later he turned and I saw that it was Jared Rolf. His face was flushed but with no other evidence that he had been drinking quite a bit, he strode over to Enfield who was standing near, quietly observant of the scene, and said: "Everybody's fed, Arnold. Let's get ahead with the race before——" He glanced toward the window and held his head a little aslant. "Gets dark early these days, you know."

Max jumped up eagerly but stopped angrily when Goodhue drawled—"Don't be in such a rush. Plenty of time for another cigarette, Connie."

Then I, too, glanced out of the window and saw by the flying clouds that the wind was rising swiftly.

CHAPTER V

THERE followed an increasing noise of voices, the hurried confusion of sorting out and claiming heavy outdoor wraps, and hosts and guests alike streamed out into the clear nipping air and down to the frozen shore. The wind didn't seem as strong as I expected it to be. The bonfire had been built up again and the older people lingered round it while the younger ones crowded together about the ice boats, examining them curiously, though few, I gathered, had any clear notion of the various advantages of each. I was feeling very conscious of my own ignorance when someone crowded in beside me and looking down, I recognized Doctor Overton. He was muttering half to himself.

"Dammit, I've backed Jared to win and now I'm not so sure." He sniffed and cocked one eye up at me. "Never saw Don Goodhue's boat close to before. No wonder he always speaks of his ice yacht. 'Tis pretty as a girl, ain't it? Body as light and neat as the fuselage of an airplane. Nifty little automobile wheel to steer with. All the comforts of home! The sissy! But she looks an able build, at that. Long backbone, you notice."

"Yes," I said, "but I don't see any rudder."

The doctor chuckled. "You're looking at the wrong end, Mr. Redhead. Ice yachting is different from ordinary sailing in some ways, though old-timers will tell you a stern-steerer, as they're called,

will beat a bow-steerer like this one if the rig is right. Far as that's concerned, we used to think a jib was a help, but even Jared knows a cat-rigged ice boat will beat a sloop nine times out of ten. Don't know what experience you've had with boats, Mr.—ah——"

"Clancy," I supplied.

"—Mr. Clancy," he repeated with a nod that indicated he had forgotten that he had already heard my name, "but you can see, probably, that these three are all cat-rigged. The *Clipper*, Rolf's boat, carries more sail, and don't be confused by the looks of her. She's home-made, in a sense, and she hasn't all the fancy gadgets of this one of Goodhue's. Look how his mast is fixed to rotate on the step, and the boom can swivel on this gooseneck; feel the texture of the canvas, fine as silk."

I complied. "Are they all stiffened out like this?" I asked.

"With battens. Yes. Nothing unusual about that. Hum-m-m, I wonder if I ought to hedge a little. Dammit, I'd hate like hell to bet on Don Goodhue and an expensive fancy job like this. . . . However, Jared can handle the old *Clipper* like nobody's business, and he's been up and down and across this lake a thousand times in every kind of weather. He carries more sail and——" He interrupted himself with an "excuse me" and vanished through the crowd as it parted for Donald Goodhue to reach his boat.

The man was as expensive and spick-and-span-looking as the *Flash*. A long white silk scarf was twined about his neck and his bronzed face, keen as a hawk, looked out challengingly from a typical flyer's helmet. He gave me a curt nod of recognition and motioning the bystanders away from the wide sweep of the out-rigged rear runners, he pushed the light craft forward off the smooth planks on which they and the bow runner had rested and brought the dainty little ship out to the starting line.

Rolf, in spite of his additional years, was the first, after the lots for position were drawn, to get his rather clumsy-looking craft into place. He was shoving it back and forth a few inches on the ice. I noticed that he had set his sheet in the cleat and that the battens of his tall sail were slightly curved, when Arnold, stop-watch in hand, fired his pistol in the air to signal "ready," and ten seconds later another sharp crack sent the three boats off like the wind.

It was wonderful to see the strength and virility of the old seaman as he shoved ahead, and running hard in his clumsy spiked boots, leaped into the shallow cockpit, his sail with a good rap full in the wind which had fallen again to a fairly light breeze.

The triangular course was in a general northerly direction, the outer line running from west to east where the lake was widest. The trooper and the third member of the committee had already skated out and taken a position near the two flags set up to indicate the turning points.

From the first Jared had the lead, though it looked to me as if the other two boats were able to outpoint him. He was farther off

the wind but almost level with the westerly mark when he came about and made it on a good free course.

The distance was great, but I could see Keyes cheering as the *Clipper* swept around the flag, caught the best of the breeze north of the second mark and turning down-wind around it, romped home at least two hundred yards ahead of Goodhue and more than twenty seconds ahead of Max.

The local element, led by Sheriff Rolf, sent up three rousing cheers, in which Doctor Overton joined. He and Jared's wife were standing quite near me, and I heard him say: "It's in the bag, Mary! It's in the bag."

She pulled off a red mitten, wet her finger and thrust it up as high as her short arm would reach. "Wind's shifting," she observed in a low voice. "Getting 'round to the south-west. If it comes on to blow——" She shook her head, rubbed her cold nose on the back of her hand and pulled her mitten on slowly. She made no move to join the little excited crowd around her triumphant and boastful husband.

Arnold had explained to me earlier that the race was to be run in three heats—which seemed an odd thing to call them for, on account of the rising wind, it appeared to be getting colder by the minute. There was a time allowance for the contestants to make minor adjustments and for the committee to move the markers to slightly different positions, the location of which had been previously agreed upon.

I was interested to note that only his father's guests, his mother and his wife had grouped themselves around Max, to cheer and encourage and make suggestions which he angrily pooh-poohed away. And only a few persons besides Meadows seemed interested in Goodhue, who had brought his boat off at a little distance beyond the near marker and was busy doing something to his runners.

"Acts a little like he knew his business," Doctor Overton remarked uncomfortably. "You think, Mary, that Jared's runners are heavy enough if the wind gets real strong?"

She shook her head as before but made no other answer. Arnold blew a whistle to bring the contestants out to start again. This time it was Goodhue who drew the position at the clear wind end of the line. He must have seen the benefit of Jared's trick of making little wet grooves in the ice for he, too, moved his skate-like runners back and forth a few inches and after the second crack of the pistol, was off ahead of the others. It looked to me as if he hadn't really been trying in the first heat for he kept his lead nearly all the way around the course and came across the finish line several lengths ahead, although Jared, in an effort to pass him, turned off the wind so suddenly that one end of his long runner plank rose at such a frightening angle that some of the women screamed and I found that I was holding my breath.

Mrs. Rolf gasped. "Tom told him a stern-steerer would hike a lot more than the newer kinds," she muttered angrily.

"Hike ?" I repeated, for it was a new term to me.

" 'S what we call it when the runner plank kicks one end up in the air," Overton explained hurriedly. "Jared might have known it would slow him down to make that try. He must have been mad clean through. Wow !" he exclaimed under his breath, as the last contestant, the *Arrow* sailed back across the starting line. "Look at Max ! He's crazy enough to burn up the *Arrow* on the spot. And she's a dam' good ship when she's handled right."

Jared's backers had clustered round him, slamming him on the back and making encouraging noises. There had been a conventional clapping of hands when the *Flash* came in first, and Constance Dangerfield ran swiftly over to offer her congratulations. Tom Burton followed and stood at a modest distance, examining the beautiful little ice yacht with great attention.

During the short intermission that followed, Jared changed to heavier runners. They said it was on account of the wind which had shifted and was rising fast again.

Doctor Overton went across and talked to him and to Arnold and then came back to the point from which we had viewed the first two heats. "Max is dropping out," he said. "I guess it's just as well. He's mad enough to be tied and that's no condition to be in when you're sailing an ice race, take it from me ! Well—" he beat his gloved hands together to restore the circulation—"it's still fifty-fifty, and I haven't hedged on Jared, Mary, so we'll both root for him, eh ?"

She nodded once more, but remained tensely silent when Arnold's pistol cracked again and two boats, this time, sped from the starting line in the same split second.

The sail of the *Flash* looked very small in comparison with that of the *Clipper*. On the first tack the latter pointed better, I thought, but the *Flash*, with a good rap full, was moving faster over the ice, and when Goodhue trimmed in the sheet, she forged a little ahead. From then on it was a breathless thing to watch. No horse-race I ever saw was so exciting. The doctor was beside himself.

"Dammit, Goodhue's no fool," he rasped out. "Watch him forcing Jared to stay in the *Flash's* wind shadow, dead astern. Won't let him split tacks. . . . S-S-S !" He drew in a hissing breath as the two boats rounded the first mark. "Dam' close," he muttered jerkily. "Maybe Goodhue didn't realize. But Jared's never afraid to use the police whistle he always carries and you can hear that even with your ears covered. Guess there must have been room but it sure looked like plenty of trouble.

"Hi !" he shouted suddenly, "there they go ! Jared's pointing better again—but hiking ! And spilling some of his wind ! Now he's got it, full and by ! Come on *Clipper !* Come on !"

They were nearing the north-eastern mark. I had a pair of

Arnold's field glasses glued to my eyes. The two boats were close again—so close that it seemed as if the steel runners on the widely extended runner planks must overlap. The *Flash* rounded the mark only a small fraction of an instant it seemed, before Jared made it on a wild skid that sent him dangerously near the rocky point on which Goodhue's house stands. He avoided it by a short tack that quickly brought him back into line, but Goodhue had taken advantage of his own undiminished speed to coast dead to windward, and before losing headway, to lay the *Flash* dead on the mark and to come straight in without another hitch.

The crowd surged closer, but there was no mad enthusiasm shown over the victor, who took his success, apparently, for granted. The presentation of the prizes elicited only half-hearted cheers. Goodhue took the silver cup full of silver dollars carelessly and immediately strode over to Constance to show it to her, evidently with some suggestion of comparison with the one she had won. They laughed together and Goodhue remained near her while various members of Arnold's house party went over to discuss and congratulate.

Doctor Overton hastily joined the trooper and the other judges who were talking to their host. I moved near enough to get some of it. Overton was eager to know if there wasn't a foul at either one of the two outer marks on the last heat, but Keyes and the other man shook their heads.

"Awful close it was, rounding my mark," the trooper admitted, "but the *Flash* kept inside the letter of the rules. No question about that."

"Humph," grunted the second member of the committee, frowning at the recollection. "When you said 'the letter of the rules' you said a mouthful. Goodhue knew just what he could get away with and what he couldn't. The *Clipper's* a good boat and Jared did a fine job, but he was outrigged and outsailed and there's no doubt but Goodhue won fair enough."

Jared had crowded in while they were speaking. His face was dark with anger. He must have known that he had no grounds with which to combat the decision. All he could do was to mutter black curses on Goodhue, his antecedents and his probable future state.

CHAPTER VI

THE party broke up soon after the finish of this main event of the day which, somehow, had fallen rather flat. Jared took the *Clipper* off immediately, sailing her, swift and sure, across the ice toward home. Mrs. Rolf lingered about uncertainly for a little, then went boldly over, congratulated Goodhue with considerable assurance of manner, quite cleverly collecting Connie at the same time and together

they got into a fairly well-kept Ford car, Mrs. Rolf doing the driving confidently and with considerable skill.

Tom Burton followed immediately, his station-wagon full of the local elderly people. Sergeant Keyes lingered to see that the other cars got off in good shape and then left, himself, on a motor-cycle with Sheriff Rolf in the sidecar.

Soon they were all gone and we trooped into the house for tea, technically, though most of us, especially Doctor Overton, preferred something more stimulating. I thought he must have bet pretty heavily for I could see no other reason for the morose fit that had descended upon him and his obvious avoidance of Donald Goodhue. After three or four drinks he took himself off, disappearing, not too steadily, along the northern drive.

It seemed that the Enfields and all their house guests were to dine with Goodhue and that the invitation was of long standing, or, perhaps, a customary yearly arrangement for it seemed to be taken quite for granted.

"Eugenia and I are not going," Max announced angrily when the matter was brought up. "Don just wants to gloat, damn him, and I've had enough of his airs for one day at least. He's a dirty stinker and the way he forces his attentions on Constance makes my blood boil. She doesn't have any idea what the score is with a man like that. No wonder the girl's flattered. Great painter falls in love with Beggar Maid! Bet she thinks he wants to marry her! Fat chance——"

"Darling," his young wife interrupted, "if we're to have dinner at home we'd better go down right away. I have some things to cook but they'll take time. I wish I'd known. I could have started. But I thought we'd be going out." She hesitated and stopped. She looked upset and I didn't think it was altogether on account of having to cook the dinner for she refused Louise's invitation to stay there and dine on funeral baked meats.

Wiggar insisted on my dressing for dinner just as if we were in town. I was lucky to escape white tie and tails. Subsequently I gathered that the reason we had to live up to standard was not to impress my host and the other guests but rather that Wiggar and his chosen master should not lose caste in the eyes of his confrère Meadows, for Donald Goodhue was the only other man who sported a dinner jacket.

It was while I was dressing that I had a chance to ask Wiggar some questions. All day, as I think I've mentioned already, in spite of the unusual set up of events and the excitement of the races, I had been haunted with an increasing feeling of ominous undercurrents of conflict, uncertainty and possible disaster. In the microcosm of a more or less isolated group of human beings, I had well learned that there are the same elements and possibilities of joy and

sorrow, triumph and tragedy as exist in the macrocosm of a great city. Here the fact seemed to me to be plainly in evidence. . . .

"What do you think of this outfit, Wiggar?" I asked.

He was brushing imaginary specks from my shoulders. The brush paused for an instant. "You don't mean the ice boat race, Mr. Peter?"

"No, I mean the human race, and you know it," I retorted. "What have they to say, below-stairs, if anything?"

"Well, sir, the family in general is well liked."

"But not Mr. Max?"

"Right, sir. He's all for equality, but when it interferes with his own wishes they say (and I quote) 'He's not so hot'."

"Aren't we all like that, Wiggar?"

"Oh, quite, sir. And just talking reform is not usually productive of results."

"How true!" I grinned at my carefully dolled up reflection in the glass. "Only in the interests of science you might loosen up a bit now. Have you unearthed any gossip that might prove enlightening?"

"You wouldn't mean in regard to Mr. Goodhue's pursuit of the young school-teacher, sir? That presents itself too forcibly to be overlooked."

"Oh, quite," I echoed. "And unfortunately that situation doesn't seem to be part of our business. Though Goodhue may be. . . . What do you think?"

"In what way, sir?"

"Any suggestion that anything is—or has been doing between him and the missus?"

"Mrs. Quincy is very fond of her mistress," Wiggar returned as if that answered my question.

"So she wouldn't talk in any case?"

"Probably not. A well-trained housekeeper she is. And very loyal."

"So that cat didn't fight?"

"No, sir."

"You tried her out along those lines, of course."

"I did, sir, on the off chance that there might be some connection. . . ." Wiggar paused hopefully.

"You mean connection with the jewel robbery—if such it may be called?"

He glanced at me from the corner of a pale eye. "You, too, think we may not be done with that, sir?"

"Well, I wonder. . . . If Enfield is wise to the most obvious implication of the facts he might surmise that his wife had need of extra funds that she didn't care to ask him for and that she did a little juggling with her jewels, to that end."

"Ah, yes. I see, sir."

"Then he might reasonably infer, as we do (I take it) that the

most probable reason for her fenagling is that someone is blackmailing her."

"Thank you, Mr. Peter."

"You thought that too?"

"Yes, sir. And Mr. Enfield's desire to delve to the bottom of the matter would be the reason for his wishing to retain your services in this disguised and delicate manner."

"I could never have put it so elegantly, but that looks to me to be the Macoy. If he knew or suspected Mrs. Enfield's previous relations with some definite person, now . . . although of course the obvious explanation isn't always the right one. . . ."

"But is more often so than not," Wiggar murmured as he crossed the room to respond to Arnold Enfield's discreet knock.

Our host had come along the hall and announced his presence very quietly, but there was nothing surreptitious in his greeting, though it did cross my mind then that if I had been alone. . . . However, all he said was: "Good gracious, man, you don't have to get into glad rags up here. It'll be hot as blazes in Don's studio; it always is, so you may be lucky to have put on thinner clothes. It's snappy out and you'd better slip on a fur coat, though the road's clear and we'll drive over. Everybody's ready, I think. Let's go."

It was what Stevenson said he tried not to call it: "A wonderful clear night of stars." The wind had gone down again and the clean bright air made one's nostrils tingle. After the excitement of the day some of us were keyed up and others had become almost unnaturally quiet. Enfield and his wife, the two Russells and I went over in one car. In the other were the younger house guests, a harmless and rather silly lot they seemed. I don't believe I ever heard any of their last names. They called each other Judy, Gracie, Paul and Clarence, I remember, but how they were related, or otherwise, I never knew . . . And they didn't stay over for the tragedy.

The radiance from a great slanting studio skylight streamed upward into the funereal plumes of drooping hemlocks, and a pair of ship's lanterns guided us to the door of Donald Goodhue's cottage. I had just turned to help Louise Fontanelli (as I still liked to think of her) out of the car when a dark flight of birds rose out of the tall trees and swirling across the light swept noisily off toward the south.

She started back. Her face looked very white in the low, diffused light.

"Caw! Caw!" The raucous cries came back faint and ever fainter.

"Crows," she murmured. "They're bad luck. Bad luck. And they don't fly at night. . . . Did you ever know of their flying at night?"

"Certainly, if something disturbs them." Arnold Enfield had come quickly around from the other side of the car. "Don't be

silly, darling. Probably it was old Landless on one of his nightly prowls." He turned to me. "We have a real hermit here, Clancy," he said cheerfully. "Lives away off at the north end of the lake all by himself. Quite a character they say. Lends distinction to a rather commonplace section. But he's a shy bird and we don't see him often."

"I've never seen him," Mrs. Russell exclaimed in her mouse-squeak of a voice, "and I'm afraid I'd be frightened to death if I ever did meet him."

"He's perfectly harmless, Ada, and stays in that gully down by the inlet all the time so you needn't worry," said her husband. "You've seen him, haven't you, Louise? And you aren't afraid."

"Not of him. No, Nelson." I thought she shivered as she drew her furs in close. "Let's not stop here in the cold."

"You need a drink, my pet." Russell laughed as he took her arm and ran with her, still laughing, into the house. Enfield left me to take care of Mrs. Russell and followed quickly.

"Louise holds her age well, doesn't she?" the lady remarked sweetly as we crossed the drive and climbed the rustic steps. "She must be at least ten years older than Nelson, and she doesn't look it, does she, Mr. Clancy?"

I was mercifully saved the necessity of replying for Goodhue was already at the door rattling a huge cocktail shaker and welcoming his guests with an apparently sincere cordiality that quite transformed his thin, boldly-modelled face.

"So glad you could come, Mr. Clancy. I feel quite honoured to have you aboard!" There was nothing enigmatic in the man's expression but his words gave me pause. I couldn't see any obvious reason for his feeling honoured. Was it just an extra touch of politeness? Or had Wiggar, in an effort to impress his new friend and fellow countryman, Meadows—— No. I couldn't believe the close-mouthed intelligent fellow could have been indiscreet. He understood that Enfield had placed me on the footing of friendship and hadn't mentioned my profession to anyone. . . . Who else knew? . . . There was Louise, of course. . . . I had followed her with my eyes the instant I was inside the door. Her strong beautiful figure showed to advantage in a low cut frock of some sort of clinging material that looked like thin suede; the queer greenish blue or bluish green bringing out the red lights in her hair. She was a little taller than Constance Dangerfield, whom she greeted affectionately with no indication of surprise at finding the girl already there. The two were an interesting contrast, the woman's mature sophisticated beauty and the girl's exquisite youthful loveliness.

Constance was the only member of the local contingent in evidence. I thought Enfield didn't like that, but of course he wasn't in a position to register the fact in any obvious way. I recognized some people from the other cottages, but they went back to town the following morning and don't come into this story. As far as I remember

Doctor Overton was the only member of the regular summer colony then present at the lake who did not appear. I wondered at the time whether he hadn't been asked or whether it was that he felt himself in no condition to accept an invitation that had been proffered. If he had been left out deliberately it would constitute an affront in the circumstances that would hurt almost anyone and I had an impulse of pity when I thought of the broken surgeon, all alone, living so uselessly. . . .

The dinner, served in the picturesque studio, was excellent and, after several rounds of cocktails, went off with verve and hilarity. Wiggar must have volunteered to help his colleague, Meadows, and it was amusing, to me at least, to watch the way the office of butler-in-chief gradually drifted without a ripple into Wiggar's hands. Once, when they were both out of the room, Goodhue leaned across Louise Enfield to whisper, "How will you trade, Mr. Clancy? I'll give you Meadows, who is really good in his way, and any picture you fancy, to boot. Or a cash equivalent if you don't care for my painting."

"Oh, but I admire it tremendously," I said, glancing up at the remarkable canvases that lined the walls. "It's a great temptation but the fact is that it was Wiggar who elected to take me for better or worse and I flatter myself that you'd find it hard to disillusion him."

"Do you give me leave to try?"

"Oh, certainly," I said.

"To-morrow then——" He laughed and his upper lip with its neat small dark moustache nearly disappeared under his handsome but somewhat predatory-looking nose. "You'll be staying on over the week-end, I hope, Mr. Clancy."

"Oh, yes, he is," Enfield cut in hastily. "He'll be here as long as we are. We won't take no for an answer."

I caught the look of surprise that Mrs. Enfield flashed across at her husband and when she glanced up sidewise at me there remained a hint of uncertainty in her lovely eyes, but she seconded his very urgent expression of hospitality with no apparent lack of enthusiasm.

"In that case, perhaps you'd sit for me in the morning, Mr. Clancy," Goodhue suggested, much to my surprise. "I've been studying your face. An interesting type. Make a good spot of colour—your hair I mean—in contrast with black and white. I'd like to make a note of it. Only a sketch, of course. I wouldn't keep you away from Louise—and Arnold—too long."

I was startled and embarrassed and was about to refuse when Enfield exclaimed, "The very thing, Clancy. You'd make a swell subject. Give Don a break, like a good chap. He must be tired painting just girls. I'd like to see what he'd make of your face——"

Which didn't sound very complimentary and they all laughed. I saw at once that I'd better agree but the circumstance gave me plenty of food for thought the rest of that gay evening. The talk after that was mostly concerned with various aspects of the ice boat

race, the merits of the various types of rig, whether at this late date there was any excuse for a stern-steerer and so forth. Mrs. Enfield showed great interest and had very definite views which seemed highly intelligent to me. Constance Dangerfield, sitting opposite her on Goodhue's right, listened attentively but took little part in the conversation even when it veered to her triumph of the morning. "I don't really think I should have won at all," she said, flushing beautifully. "If Mrs. Enfield hadn't dropped out and taken with her the strange"—she glanced up at Wiggar who was handling about coffee and cigarettes—"the strange *gentleman*," she added firmly, "I would simply have been wiped off the map !"

Wiggar managed to look as if he really wasn't there while all the people at the table applauded both him and the girl.

That finished the dinner. After the long mission table was cleared, closed and pushed aside, Louise wanted to see the picture Goodhue was painting of Connie Dangerfield. He demurred at first. It wasn't nearly finished, he said; but at last he yielded to her insistence and removed the big piece of embroidery that hung over a large easel standing with its back turned in the corner of the studio.

When it was wheeled out into the light everybody exclaimed over its beauty and the likeness to the original. The smooth dark hair, the wonderful liquid quality of the grey eyes, the high cheek bones and fine straight nose, the tender smiling mouth, were faithfully portrayed, and in the expression there was something not obvious to the casual eye; a directness and simplicity in the character of the subject that implied a hidden strength of purpose that would do much to offset the inexperience of youth.

"It's perfect, Don," cried Mrs. Enfield, impulsively clasping the blushing girl around the waist. "What do you mean it isn't finished ? Don't you dare touch it again !"

"You don't know what you're talking about, Louise," Goodhue countered brusquely. "I've got to have more sittings for this and I have other ideas in mind. Connie is an inspiration. This is only a try-out. She's going to help me paint the masterpiece that has only been a dream till now. Before this I have done nothing ! Some day you will see, all of you, the dam'dest finest Madonna that was ever painted !" He bowed low before the girl, took both of her hands and pressed them, palm upward, to his lips.

Just at that instant I heard a slight sound behind me and was aware of a dark figure that seemed to have materialized in the shadow of the tall screen that guarded the service door. It was an instant before I recognized the man. It was Tom Burton, Mrs. Rolf's son. He was standing perfectly still but there was something of the tenseness of a tightly coiled spring in his attitude and a strange withheld, inner look in his deep-set eyes.

Oddly enough (or so it seemed to me then) it was Louise Enfield who noticed him before any of the others. She called his name quite eagerly and he stepped quietly out into the light.

CHAPTER VII

"I JUST wanted you to know I'd come, Constance. There's no hurry. I'll be waiting for you out here. Let me know when you're ready." Young Burton spoke evenly, courteously. He seemed entirely at his ease: no assertiveness, but no hint of apology or explanation.

The girl hesitated only the fraction of a second. "I think I'd better go now, Mr. Goodhue," she said a trifle breathlessly. "It's getting late and I have to teach in the morning. Can't get excused for another day, not possibly."

"Oh, nonsense, Connie," he returned sharply. "It isn't late at all. After all the excitement of the day you won't sleep anyway. You run along, Burton. I'll see that Miss Dangerfield gets back safely."

The young man waited quietly, his strong clever workman's hands hanging loosely at his sides. His firm lips were slightly parted, showing even white teeth. He did not speak; just kept his direct, non-committal gaze on the girl's face.

There was drama in the sudden silence though it lasted only a few seconds.

"Just wait till I get my coat, Tom," she said. "No, Mr. Goodhue, I really must go. I've had a wonderful day! Thanks so much for asking me. Good night, dear Mrs. Enfield! Good night to you all!"

Goodhue followed her toward the bedroom where the women had taken off their wraps. As they passed me I heard him say: "You'll come to-morrow afternoon, my dear. Don't fail me. I need you——"

I didn't catch her reply but he turned and glanced at me. "He'll be here only in the morning," he murmured as she disappeared through the door.

Mrs. Enfield, with her ever ready tact, had gone over to speak to young Burton who had retained his position just inside the screen, when suddenly a loud voice burst in from over its top.

"None of your fine airs with me, Meadows, my lad! I don't need no introduction to Mr. Don Goodhue nor announcement neither. He knows who I am and I bet he can guess what I come for," and without further preliminaries Jared Rolf thrust his shock of upstanding grizzled hair and his lean weathered face around the corner of the screen.

"Hey!" he exclaimed after his sharp blue eyes had made a swift circuit of the company, "where'd you come from, Tom? And what you doin' here?"

"I thought Constance shouldn't cross the ice alone in the dark," Burton answered simply. "It's hard to see the holes that have been cut through for fishing——"

"Just what I thought," Rolf spoke uneasily. "But if you was comin', why the hell did yer mother send me? Did she think it would take the two of us to bring a slip of a girl home safe?"

Tom Burton remained quite impassive and attempted no reply. His face was nearly as blank as Wiggar's and words could not say more. Constance came back a few seconds later and the oddly assorted trio went out together.

The party went on as merrily as a party can when the host makes little attempt to hide his loss of interest. In consequence it was fairly early when it broke of its own weight. Goodhue seemed to cheer up a little when he found we were leaving and his manner to me was very gracious as I agreed, under stress, to an appointment with him at ten-thirty in the morning.

Nothing happened of any possible interest until perhaps an hour after we reached Enfield's house. Wiggar had just left me when there came a tap at my bedroom door. I called from the bed: "Come in," and snapped on the light as the master of the house opened the door and closed it quietly behind him.

"I just came along to see if you have everything you need, Clancy," he said. His manner was uncertain. He looked worried.

"I'm as comfortable as a flea on an English sheep dog," I said—or some such inanity. "But come in and stay awhile. The fire's still brisk and gay. I turned in only because I thought everyone else had."

Enfield came slowly across the room and dropped heavily into a chair in front of the fire. I jumped out of bed and into a dressing-gown and hastily closed the windows Wiggar had opened for the night. I could see mine host had something on his mind, and I was curious, as usual.

He was silent for so long that it seemed necessary for me to open the ball. "A wonderful day it's been," I said. "I wouldn't have missed it for anything."

"Glad you had a good time," he remarked absently and added in another tone: "You will go over and sit for Don Goodhue in the morning."

I said: "Yes, but why do you want me to? It seems perfectly silly to me. My plain old phiz! Why should anyone want to make a study of it?"

"Oh, Don's interested in all sorts of types. Made a sketch of Jared once. Flattered the old man to think he wanted it, but Don told someone he needed a head for Judas in one of his religious paintings and somehow it got back to Jared. There was quite a fuss, but Mrs. Rolf makes a pretty penny out of doing Don's laundry so Jared simmered down and it was all patched up."

"You don't think he wants my type for Beelzebub in a pretty little picture of hell or something, do you?" I asked lightly.

Enfield shook his head. "I don't know what he's after," he said

with a grim glance, "but it's evident he'd like to study you at close quarters. Maybe it is just in the interest of art. . . ."

"Why else should it be?" I waited for an answer that was long in coming, but I kept on waiting. If you want a man to talk, in a case like this, it's the only thing to do. Don't try to help him with suggestions. It may steer him off from the main issue if he's inclined to hesitate about giving his full confidence. A long pause gives him time to get his case clear and at last the silence will be so unbearable that he'll have to spill whatever is uppermost in his mind.

It took several minutes but it finally worked with Enfield. He kept his anxious gaze fixed on the fire and said in a low tone: "I fancy I may as well be frank with you, Clancy. I've honestly taken a liking to you and I enjoy your company very much, but I'm afraid I must confess that I asked you up here partly on false pretences."

"Of course. I understood that," I remarked easily. "You needn't make any apologies. You had an idea that I might be able to set your mind at rest about a succession of curious coincidences that looked pretty suspicious. That's right. Isn't it?"

He looked up at me then, and sharply. It was a minute more before he said: "Tell me exactly what you mean by that. You needn't pull your punches. I'm desperately concerned and I've got to know the truth, whatever it is." His voice was low and harsh and his heavy jaw closed gratingly.

"You think Mrs. Enfield may have taken her own jewellery and caused it to be pawned in order to meet some need or obligation that seemed to her of great importance and which she didn't like to bother you about," I said composedly.

"You state it very nicely, Clancy." His grim expression did not change. "You think that's the most probable explanation of what happened about the damned stuff?"

"It could be. Certainly." I saw there was no reason for beating about the bush. "However, you'd be the one who would know best about that."

"What d'you mean?" he countered sharply.

"It's easy to see that you are no miser as far as material things go, Mr. Enfield," I said, facing him squarely. "It isn't any of my business, of course, except as it bears on the question you yourself have brought up. I mean to say, if you've always been sympathetic with your wife's impulses even when they didn't coincide with your ideas, and if, forgive me, you've always made allowances for her early experiences in a life that was very different from your own, so that if something in the early days came up now and made a financial demand on her purse, she wouldn't hesitate to confide in you. If you can be sure of that, I think you are worrying unnecessarily and that the peculiar facts have some quite different explanation."

A clock in the hall struck twelve, marking the end of one day and the beginning of another. Enfield didn't hear it. He had retired

into himself and left his face unguarded. I couldn't help pitying the man.

At last he muttered, half to himself, "I love Louise better than anything in the world; better than my own life, ambitions, anything. I'd die for her and I'd kill anyone who——" The heavy muscles of his shoulders jerked spasmodically and he sat erect. "I've been jealous of her past, Clancy," he exclaimed bitterly. "I've tried not to show it but she's quick and I've no doubt but that she's sized me up all right, up to a point, that is. But if any damned son of Satan is blackmailing her, I'll see him in hell!" He half rose then sank heavily back and mopped his forehead.

I waited a second before I asked: "What makes you think it may be Goodhue?"

"Humph," he groaned. "You got that, did you?" I nodded. He went on: "I'll tell you. When the old pawnbroker described the man who brought the stuff to him, I was struck by the likeness. Except for the limp and the way he was dressed."

"But the same description might fit a hundred people. Made me think of Basil Rathbone."

"Him! Yes. Don't you think he and Goodhue look alike?"

"Yes," I said. "It's quite remarkable. But an old man's account of the way another man looked is hardly enough in itself."

Enfield interrupted in turn. He spoke hastily. "I know Don was in town that week. He's a spendthrift and always in need of money. Owes a lot, though he puts up a big front. You can see for yourself what he is with women. . . . And he must have been able to put himself across even better when he was younger."

"He knew Mrs. Enfield then?"

"Yes."

"How well?"

"I don't know. She never said. But they certainly weren't strangers when they met up here."

"When was that?" I asked.

"Oh, some six or seven years ago. When we first built this place."

"Has there been anything since?"

It wasn't necessary to be explicit. "No," he cried as if he had been stung. "At least I'm certain of that. In spite of my dullness and all, Louise loved me when she married me and she loves me still. I know that! Dammit, I don't care now what she may have run into before we met. She was married to that dancing partner of hers, Reggie Star, you know, and I hated him for a long, long time, but God knows I'm all over that now. She's given me years and years of happiness. She belongs to me," he added fiercely. "I'll protect her." He stopped on a panting breath.

"Why don't you ask her about it?" I said earnestly. "Tell her what you've just told me. Get her confidence. It ought to be easy."

"To tell a woman you've lived with for over twenty years that you suspect her of having done something so evil that she'd pay through the nose to keep it quiet! Easy!" he repeated angrily. "Little you know! It might spoil our whole future if none of it was true. If some professional crook actually did take that confounded jewellery. No, Clancy. I want you to find out everything you can about Don Goodhue. Study him to-morrow. Pump him. Get something on him if you can. Damn the man, I wouldn't spare him." Enfield started to his feet.

"Look here, old man," I said, gripping him by the arm to steady him, "you're going off half-cocked. I grant you that I wouldn't pin any halos on a chap like Goodhue. He looks like a wolf all right, but he may have reformed. He might even be sincere about this nice young school-teacher. He may intend to marry her."

"Like hell he does. Poor kid, she's sweet! But even so, does that help us any? If he means to make an honest girl of this one, just for variety, won't he need money more than ever? And wouldn't he go on bleeding—bleeding——"

He choked and after a short injunction to me for God's sake to get after Donald Goodhue for all I was worth, he left me to a somewhat troubled slumber.

CHAPTER VIII

I FREELY admit that I was eager to keep my appointment with Goodhue in the morning. It isn't often that a very plain chap in my position and of my profession is invited to sit to a world-renowned painter and I was frankly curious to see what he would make of me, as well as what, in Enfield's interest, I could make of him.

He was all ready for me in his studio when I got there, promptly at ten-thirty, that Friday morning. He had on a French blouse covered with paint and his whole appearance and manner were quite different from anything I had yet seen.

After a hasty, off-hand greeting, he placed me in a chair on a low platform, adjusted the shades that could be used to temper the brilliance of reflection from the studio skylight, made a slight adjustment of my position and began to paint. The work went forward in complete silence for many minutes.

At length he spoke in an absent-minded, though somewhat irritated, tone. "Don't think you have to sit like a tailor's dummy, Mr. Clancy. Just keep more or less in the same position. I want about a three-quarter view but it doesn't have to be rigid. Smoke if you want to and I'd rather you'd talk than not. Tell me about yourself. What's your racket?"

"My racket?" I repeated, warning myself to be on guard but not to show it.

"My racket, your racket, everybody has a racket, Mr. Clancy.

Mine's painting, as you see. I have a hunch that yours is interesting, too. What is it ?"

It didn't sound urgent or specially insistent but I felt as if the wide walls would echo with the sound that wasn't there if I didn't answer promptly.

I said : "I gather bits of interesting facts, here and there, for the New York *Meteor*." This was strictly true. As you will remember, our young friend Bill Gorham is indebted to me for many a juicy bit for his paper, and in recognition of several scoops I had donated, his editor had furnished me with a Press card to use whenever I needed one.

"Mm-m-m !" Goodhue seemed engrossed in his work for a while. Then he raised his head and stared at my face a long time through squinted dark lashes. At last he turned back to his canvas and murmured absently. "A reporter, eh ? Funny. I wouldn't have thought that. Must be something special. . . . Expert. . . . You have that look. You aren't an art critic, by any chance ?" This time his glance was sharp and his eyes were open.

"Do I look artistic ?" I laughed.

"No. But for that matter do I ?" he countered. "Not this minute, of course, but ordinarily ? Would you have guessed yesterday that I had anything to do with the arts if somebody hadn't told you ? Of course you wouldn't. We modern chaps couldn't afford the blatantly picturesque Frenchiness of the gay nineties. It doesn't comport architecturally any more. And it would be the wrong kind of advertising." He turned to a high work-table, squeezed some red paint on the palette that curved broadly around his left hand and arm and said : "You wouldn't have anything to do in the advertising field, I suppose ?"

"It's hardly in my line," I answered. That at least was strictly true and a good example of understatement.

"Of course, naturally, you'd know the art critic on the *Meteor*." It was tentative with a hint of an upward inflection.

"Burgess Calfield. Yes. Of course. Why ?"

"Oh, nothing. He's pretty caustic—and choosy. Has a lot of influence with buyers, I believe. . . . I'm getting ready for a one-man show in New York. Send you a ticket if you'd like to come with him. What's your address ?"

I gave him that of my apartment. He wrote it down and went on with the sketch. Presently he said, that was enough for the present and that I could look at it if I cared to. Which, of course, I did.

And thought it amazingly clever. I suppose no man knows how he really looks, or else Goodhue deliberately intended to flatter me.

"Phew !" I exclaimed. "You sure have done me justice !"

"Do you like it ?" he asked, eager as any amateur.

"Like it ? It's a marvellous piece of work. I don't know much about art, but if that guy should turn this way just a little farther I'd offer him a cigarette and I bet he'd take it."

The painter laughed delightedly and for that one minute I really liked him; he seemed so spontaneously and ingenuously happy. He said he'd like to have me come over again the following morning for a sort of check-up but he didn't think he'd really need much more for his purpose. I didn't press him then to tell me what that was. I thought I'd find out the next day. But for some there are no to-morrows and even now I can only guess what he wanted to paint me for.

My release from posing didn't constitute a dismissal. Goodhue insisted on my waiting while he washed his hands. Meadows appeared with a decanter of sherry, some fruit and biscuits and I was glad enough for an excuse to linger, for I didn't feel that I'd done my erstwhile employer's case much good, although there was one small point that I felt might be worthy of a little consideration. It was overshadowed soon after by another circumstance and I didn't think of it again for a long time.

Over the sherry Donald Goodhue became quite expansive. He mentioned that he had been in town the previous week moving into a very swank new studio on the East side overlooking the river. "A good thing to do now and then," he remarked. "Makes one get rid of lots of junk. I found things I didn't know I had. A whole box of stuff, still boxed after my last flitting, I sent up here. Meadows opened it up this morning. Mostly rotten old sketches I'm afraid and ripe for a bonfire. We can safely have one here. A regular holocaust. But I'll have to look them over first. Would you care, literally, to risk an eye? They may be terrible."

He took my interest for granted and crossing to a huge, carved screen that blocked off one corner of the room he pulled it aside, disclosing a big packing case with the top off.

One by one he took out various canvases, turned them to the light and after a brief study put them aside in several piles. "Too academic," he murmured. "Wouldn't do to show them now, but you never can tell, Clancy. Styles change. Some of these aren't too bad and ten years from now anything I've put a brush to will have a market value. You mark my words! People are going to get tired of nudes with hideous faces and ankles thick as a telegraph pole. Then my earlier manner isn't going to look so out of date. I'll be able to——"

He stopped short with a large unframed picture in his hands. He looked at it for a full minute, then went quickly over to place it on an empty easel, and as he turned it to the light he burst out with a sardonic laugh.

"Can you beat that, Clancy? It's good. Dammit, it is really good. Reggie Star wouldn't let her pose for me and I had to do it from memory, but it is Louise Fontanelli to the life, as she was then. I swear it is."

"Yes," I said. "Yes. When I first saw her dance she looked like that."

He didn't seem to have heard me. He laughed again and his eyes were bright with malice. "I'm going to put this in the catalogue right now," he said. "And I know just what to call it. 'Fond Memories.' See? This is Pierrette, with her flounces carelessly disposed and her lovely legs and arms very much in evidence. She is gazing out of the window after the lover who has deserted her and she is indulging in 'Fond Memories.' It'll burn old Arnold up! He'll buy it at any price I choose to put on it. Wish I'd thought of it before. But it's a cinch. Here! I'll label it on the back so there won't be any mistake and then I'll write it in the catalogue which is nearly ready to turn in to the gallery. So!"

He seized a brush full of thick oil paint and wrote the title on the grey back of the canvas in bold plain letters that could never be rubbed out.

CHAPTER IX

I WAS so completely disgusted that I felt I'd run a risk of showing my hand if I stayed much longer and as soon as the bottom of the packing case was reached I expressed my interest in its contents (which was genuine) and left.

There was an ice boat coursing silently down the lake as I started back. The breeze was light but it sailed so fast that it had reached the landing-stage before I was half-way back to the Enfield cottage. Through the open spaces here and there between the trees I could see a slim figure muffled in furs busily lowering the sail and presently, just as I reached the house, the skipper, starting up the slope, pulled off her big goggles and I recognized Mrs. Max. She called out a greeting, waved her hand and disappeared through the evergreens that partially hid their studio-camp.

I found Louise Enfield alone by the fire and the house seemed surprisingly quiet. "Arnold had a call from his Portland office just after you left," she explained, "and as the younger set were going back this afternoon anyway they decided to drive in with him. He left his excuses and said to tell you he'd be back by tea-time probably. So you'll have to depend on me for entertainment this afternoon, Mr. Clancy, I'm afraid."

I made the obvious response to that and if I hadn't been so anxious to warn Arnold of the trap Goodhue was setting for him, I would have welcomed the prospect of a *tête-à-tête*. However, even that didn't materialize to any extent, for the Russells were still there and Max and his wife came up for lunch which was served almost immediately.

After that was over Mrs. Russell decided she must take a long tramp in the beautiful winter woods, and, no one else rising to the bait, it became necessary for her husband to accompany her.

Max wanted his mother to see the picture he had been working on for some days and though I wasn't specifically invited, I tagged along.

It was terrible, I thought, but then I'm not up on the fine points of this so-called Dali stuff and things. It looked to me like a weak attempt to paint "the little man who wasn't there." There was an irregular mess in the foreground that might have been intended for some sort of figure but all the elements of the thing were vague and inconclusive. Goodhue's technique was pretty modern but it was strong and intentional and the colour was gorgeous. Beside his worst canvas this painting of Max Enfield's would look like a childish daub. Or so I thought, though I hope I was able to lie like a gentleman.

I had really done my best when Max said: "You were over at Don's this morning. What did you think of his work, Mr. Clancy?"

His expression was that of a person who can't help biting on a sore tooth. I made as tactful a reply as my inner workings could conjure up but it didn't go over very big. He shrugged and muttered something about "painters who are bound by precedent, bitten with the bug of realism, and who paint religious subjects because the churches who want them have the most money to spend."

Mrs. Max was more outspoken in her criticism of Goodhue's methods and passionate in her admiration of her husband's talent. I found I couldn't think of any more convincing flattery to add and it was the young painter's mother who passed off an embarrassing minute with tact and a show of what looked like a really deep and genuine devotion.

I was glad when she suggested that I go over to the Rolf farm with her to get some extra cream for which the cook was clamouring.

"I'll take the *Arrow*, Max, if you don't mind," she called back as we were going out and, without waiting for an answer, she closed the door.

"He's not too keen on Eugenia sailing the *Arrow*," she said as we went quickly up the slope, "but he can't refuse his old mother who taught him all he knows about ice yachts. I hope you're willing to trust yourself to my tender mercies, Mr. Clancy."

"I'm sure it will be thrilling," I said.

"I'll try to make it so if you're game," she returned with a gay little laugh and took the rest of the path more quickly than before.

A faint haze was spreading across the fathomless blue of the sky, but the wind was fairly steady when, warmly protected by fur coats, gloves, leather helmets and large, mask-like goggles, we prepared to start.

"We'll run north a bit, I think." Mrs. Enfield lifted a weather-eye. "There's no hurry and it's a perfect day. Better even than yesterday. You'll like it, I'm sure."

I agreed heartily and a minute later we were on our way, flying past the home grounds and heading toward the point on which

Donald Goodhue's studio stood outlined against the heavy timber that reached in dark majesty toward the sky.

Even in that light air we moved noiselessly and with surprising speed. It was a wonderful sensation; as light as flying and seemingly faster because of the nearness of the woods and shores surrounding us.

The cockpit was just large enough nicely to contain two people, but, though we were close together, the wind of our flight made ordinary conversation impossible. I could only shout my congratulations as the skipper skilfully made the most of a windward tack, avoiding, by inches it seemed, the wholly inadequate-looking barrier of small, far-spaced cedars that guarded an area where a big red danger-sign stood up boldly in the middle of a group of shallow puddles of clear water, indicating the location of active springs a little distance out from the curve of the shore.

Only after we had landed safely near Rolf's ice boat on the other side, did I have an opportunity to express my admiration of her sailing technique and my delight in the whole novel experience. I thought (though I refrained from saying it) that the *Arrow* would have had a swell chance of beating Jared's boat certainly and giving the *Flash* a much better run for its money in yesterday's race if Louise Enfield instead of her son had been the skipper.

"I'm so glad you enjoyed it, Mr. Clancy," she said as we climbed the trodden path up through the snow banks. "I could have made it more exciting if I hadn't stuck to the smooth ice or if I'd let her hike more when we turned across the wind but I wanted to start you easy."

"I almost took a bite out when my heart came up and I thought we were going to hit that danger spot near the other side of the lake. It looked as if we'd slam through that sketchy bunch of little evergreens stuck in the ice before you could possibly come about." She laughed happily and I went on: "By the way, I notice there are several fishing holes cut through here and there. Isn't there a Maine law against fishing through the ice?"

"If there is, it doesn't apply to private ponds, privately stocked as this one is," she replied. "Our Club owns all the property around the shore, except Jared's farm. We don't care for the winter fishing but he does and it makes for good feeling to allow him and his friends to cut a few holes. They're so small they don't make any trouble and no outsiders are allowed to trespass. Jared sees to that."

"What about the hermit I've been hearing about who lives at the far end of the lake?" The idea of anyone living alone in this cold wilderness was enough to fire one's imagination and pique his curiosity.

"Oh, he's allowed to fish, of course," she answered carelessly. "He's perfectly harmless and wouldn't bother anyone. If you're interested in quaint characters you'd find him quite a study, I imagine, that is, if you could catch him. I haven't seen him half a dozen

times in that many years. I guess Mary Rolf is the only person who knows very much about him. Ah, there she is now. Mary!" she called. "Yoo-hoo, Mary!"

A lumpy dark figure at the corner of the nearest farm building straightened and waved a red-mittened hand as we came up. "Hello," she called cheerfully. "Glad to see you. Just been out feeding the stock. How's everything?"

"Fine," responded Mrs. Enfield cordially. "Say, Mary, I was just telling Mr. Clancy you're the only person who knows about our hermit. Has he been around much this winter?"

"Oh, yes. He's over in his shack now, I guess." She pointed. "See the smoke towards the north there? You can't see the cabin 'cause it's down in the gully. Yes, he's a queer customer," she rambled on as we went toward the house. "Dresses in leather like the pictures in Pa's old James Fennimore Cooper's books. Remember? Shoots deer in season (and mebbe out sometimes I guess if the truth was known) and tans the skins himself. Looks real good in 'em, he does, too, though you'd think he'd freeze to death this kind of weather. He waits till the men has gone off to the woods or fields or whatever and then he comes up and I give him milk. Jared caught me at it once and threw a caniption fit, but old Landless just looked at him a funny way he has and Jared shut up quick and went on about his business. Talk is that a hermit like that can put a curse on the cattle and the fields if you cross him. I don't believe it, but Jared does. He didn't say nothing more about the milk, but he sure was mad at me and what d'you think he done?"

Without waiting for a reply she went on faster than before! "Look at that corner by the bay-window right there? It faces south, like you see. Well, I'd planted a big bunch of golden glow there and it was getting along fine and just coming into bloom. The yellow flowers looked so pretty against the white wall. We lived in Baltimore when I was married the first time and we had lots of golden glow in the back yard. This was the first I'd tried to raise here and it done me good every time I looked out of the window to see how grand it was coming along. Always Jared can't bear me wasting my time planting flowers, so that day he waited till old Landless was gone then he went into the barn and got his scythe and cut down the whole bunch. I hoped it would come up again from the roots. It sometimes does. But that was a year ago and now I don't suppose it ever will." Her lips looked thin in comparison with the plumpness of her cheeks. She shut them grimly as she opened the door and ushered us into the kitchen.

Someone moved quickly aside when we entered and I saw, over the woman's shoulders, that Rolf had been standing quite close in front of the door and that the young school-teacher-boarder, flushed and defiant, was still facing it, on the other side of the kitchen table.

Mrs. Rolf spoke quickly. "What's the matter, Connie?"

Rolf swung about and answered for her. "She's aiming to go

back again to pose for that there son of a sea cook, Don Goodhue!" he exclaimed in a raised voice. "You know a feller like that don't mean her no good, Mary. He's just one of these here cold-blooded artist-slickers. Got no red blood in his veins. Throw her off like an old shoe when he's had his fun. I'm just warning the poor girl. She's young and——"

Louise Enfield interposed. "You're going the wrong way about this, Jared," she said in a low clear steady voice. "No girl of spirit wants to be browbeaten like that."

"But Goodhue's no good for her. You know that, Miss Enfield!" Rolf returned hotly. "You tell her to keep away from him!"

"I promised I'd go, Mrs. Enfield." The girl was visibly struggling for control. "Mr. Goodhue is a great artist. If I can help him, even in the smallest and humblest way to paint another masterpiece, I'm overjoyed to do it. He has a knightly sort of manner that many people might find it hard to understand, but he has always treated me with the greatest consideration and respect and I"—she choked a little—"I'm going to his studio as I promised." And turning swiftly she fled from the room.

Jared, with a muttered curse, said something about getting in more wood and flung out of the back door.

Mary Rolf's eyes were dark and full of trouble. "What do you think, Louise?" In her anxiety she spoke as one plain woman to another.

"I don't believe we can force our ideas on any spirited young creature, Mary. Apparently there's no way to learn except by our own sometimes bitter experience. And no matter what we may know—or think we know—about Donald Goodhue, this time he may be serious. However bad it looks, it doesn't seem as if there could be any man so base as to take advantage of as fine and trusting a girl as Constance Dangerfield."

The older woman shook her head. "I haven't got that much confidence in *men*," she said bitterly. "Connie—she's twined herself like a rose around my old stick of a heart—and I'd do most anything to save her from herself or from anything that seems like it's piling up against her."

She crossed hurriedly to the window. We all saw the girl in her gay skating outfit running swiftly down the path to the lake and Jared, with his arms full of stove wood, gazing dourly after her.

CHAPTER X

THERE was another ice boat out as we sailed back, one I hadn't seen before. I was surprised to notice how competently it was handled, when Louise, by putting her face close to mine, made me understand that it belonged to and was being skippered by Doctor Overton. Our voices carried far in the crisp silence and we came

near enough to hail him, but I was glad we didn't get any closer. A drinking man in an ice yacht was hardly my idea of a safety-first for any innocent bystander.

He was still sailing the northern reach of the lake when we came in-shore and found Max's young wife, Eugenia, waiting for us. "Max is in a terrible mood," she said as soon as we were out of the ice boat. "He's shut me out of the studio and I started up to the house, Louise, but turned back when I saw you. How's the wind? Looked perfect. You shouldn't have come in so soon."

"We can go out again—or you can take Mr. Clancy, Eugenia, while I run up to Susan with the cream," said the older woman eagerly. "The ice is really too perfect to waste. It looks as if it might snow to-night. You'd better enjoy the fun while it lasts."

All three of us then began being very self-sacrificing and polite and there seemed nothing for it but to draw lots, when suddenly Wiggar appeared at the top of the slope and waved his hand in a gesture that combined the maximum of respect with an equal quantity of urgency.

"Something's up," I said. "Give me the cream, Mrs. Enfield and you two go out and enjoy yourselves. If it's nothing important, I'll be back as soon as possible for my turn."

I didn't wait for any more expostulations, but took the small pail of cream and ran up toward the house. Wiggar met me half-way.

"Sorry, sir. Your office on the wire. Captain O'Malley said to locate you at once and have you call him back."

I wasn't as disappointed as I might have been when I found what O'Malley wanted, for the sky was clouding over and the prospect of spending the afternoon beside the pleasant fire in my own bedroom writing out some material he needed certainly had its good points.

From my windows there were lovely glimpses of the lake and the surrounding country and it wasn't too easy to keep my attention focused on the work in hand. While I was settling down to it I saw the two women start off up the lake in the *Arrow* and a little later, though Goodhue's point interfered somewhat with the view, I realized that they were trying out their speed on the course of the last heat of yesterday's race, and wondered if they were timing themselves and what their record might be.

Presently Mrs. Max landed Louise near the Enfield boat house and went out again alone in the *Arrow*. I did not see her come back. I heard Louise go up to her bedroom and I didn't see her again that afternoon and evening until she came down, dressed for dinner about six-thirty.

That was after Arnold had come, and gone. I had instructed Wiggar to let him know, as soon as he got back from Portland, that I wanted to see him as early as convenient.

Wiggar came up to my room with some tea around five o'clock and brought Mr. Enfield up shortly after. I thought the man looked worn and very anxious. He asked Wiggar to get him a drink, pushed

a chair over close, slumped heavily into it and said: "What is it, Clancy? You've found out something? About Don Goodhue?"

I nodded.

"Dammit," he burst out in an ugly grating whisper, "he is at the bottom of this mess! I felt it in my bones. What d'you know? Can you prove it? I'm out to get that damn blackmailer, cost whatever it may. If we can't take it into court, at least I can beat the daylights out of the infernal buzzard! He——"

"Wait a minute," I broke in sharply. "You're off on the wrong foot. I haven't found any connection between him and the incident of your wife's jewels. On the other hand, blackmailing of one kind or another is distinctly up the man's alley. Try to be as patient as you can and listen to this."

Wiggar came in just then and I thought Arnold needed at least one of the three drinks that he took in rapid succession while I told him, in as few words as possible, about Goodhue's early painting of Louise Fontanelli, and the purpose in regard to it that he had plotted out of a quick and certainly unscrupulous if not thoroughly vicious mind.

Half-way through the short recital, Enfield jumped out of his chair and stood, fuming with fury, on the hearthrug.

"What can a man do with a beast like that, Clancy?" he cried in muffled tones. "Doesn't the law give me *any* hold on him? If it's really a portrait of Louise that people will recognize—— Is it?" he urged. "Looks like her, does it?"

I nodded again. "He says he painted it from memory; that her first husband persuaded her not to sit for him when she was Mrs. Star."

Arnold turned from kicking back a falling log. "Reggie Star felt that way about him, too?" he asked quickly. "Humph! Then Louise knew Goodhue as long ago as that."

"Not necessarily, do you think?" I tried to calm down the man's fierce anger. "He may have seen her across the footlights, as I did, and so many others. Goodhue is very talented. And he would have had little trouble in getting photographs of so beautiful and celebrated a person as Louise Fontanelli."

Arnold shook his head. "You're trying to let me down easy, Clancy. I can see that. But if Don Goodhue is blackmailing Louise direct, then it's about some indiscretion of hers—I'm damn sure it was nothing more—something that happened before I ever knew her. God! I wish she'd told me! I know she had a hard time in those early days. She was young and inexperienced. No telling what——" He broke off to hark back. "You think the likeness is still good enough so that she would be recognized? Hell, what a fix to be in! Everybody we know in New York will go to his show. Everybody. And what will they think? 'Fond Memories'!" He hurled the glass he was holding into the fire-place where it crashed

to splinters against the bricks. "Can't I keep him from using a title like that on an unauthorized picture of my wife?"

"If you could prove it was unauthorized, I believe you might have a case," I answered. "But you'd have to sue him."

"No! No!" He cast the idea violently aside. "That would make more of a stir. The papers would take it up and have fun with it. Everybody would believe—No," he reiterated. "I'll buy it at his own price, no matter what it is. But I won't let it get into his damned exhibition. That's one thing certain. I'll see him in hell first. I'm going over to his studio right this minute. If he'll sell it now, well and good. I'll pay his price. But if he insists on showing it first I'll destroy it, and him, too, if necessary."

His face was red with congested blood and before I could say a word more he tore open the door and shut it with controlled ferocity behind him.

I finished the memorandum that O'Malley needed and went over to the window. Solitary flakes of feathery snow had begun to drift down across the greying landscape. It was getting almost too dark to see before I turned away and Wiggar came in to light the lamps.

While I was changing for dinner he mentioned an odd encounter he had had that morning when out skating all by himself.

"You were posing for Mr. Goodhue, sir, and I thought you wouldn't mind if I went out and looked the ground over, as one might say."

"Casing the joint, I believe is the technical term," I prompted.

"Quite so, sir." No lessening for the preternatural gravity. "As you say."

"Have a good time?"

"Oh, quite, sir. The ice is still perfect over most of the lake and the shore line is beautiful. Ahem." Wiggar cleared his throat. "Perhaps you have noticed, sir, the small fishing holes cut in the ice here and there. Yes. Well, there's one quite at the northern end of the lake, and there I saw a very odd-looking person, very odd indeed. His back was toward me, he was wearing a leather sort of cap that covered his ears, and he didn't hear my skates until I was quite close. Then he turned hurriedly and I saw that he was dressed all in leather from head to foot. Chamois or deerskin it was, and fringed down the trouser seams like the pictures of famous Indian Scouts and pioneers. For a minute we looked at each other in what I would describe as startled silence. His face expressed surprise and after a second an almost childish amusement as I lifted my cap.

" 'Good morning,' I said. 'Any luck?' for I saw that he had a dropline in his hand. 'Not yet,' he replied. And just then the line jerked. He let it run out. 'A bass?' I guessed. He nodded and began to play his fish. I waited, quietly, of course, and soon he brought his catch out on to the ice. As fine a small-mouth black as I ever saw. In my mind I questioned what the law might be, but

thought it quite unnecessary to mention any doubt I might have had. It was, unquestionably, a fine fish. He seemed to appreciate my enthusiasm and we fell into conversation about fishing and hunting. He guessed, for some reason, that I am English by birth. He was born in Canada, he said, which he seemed to feel constituted a sort of bond or something, for he talked quite freely about sport and only turned reticent when I indicated a personal interest in his place of residence and mode of life. I didn't press the matter, of course, but I couldn't fail to be intrigued by his very unusual and absolutely quite smart and effective mode of dress."

"That must have been the hermit I've heard about," I said, amused by Wiggar's suddenly broadened standards of costume. "What's his name?"

"He didn't say, sir."

I recollected it. "Landless," I said. "What a good name for a hermit, Wiggar! Do you suppose it's a phony?"

"I think it well might be an alias, sir. His voice and manner did not entirely agree with his backwoods costume."

"Your romantic nose scents mystery," I teased.

"Oh, no, sir. At least—well—any unexplained circumstance——" He hesitated.

"Might have a bearing on a crime," I supplied. "But here we don't even know that we have one and you're not suggesting that your pioneer friend is associated with—er—a person who shall be nameless in some blackmail racket."

"Oh, quite the contrary, I should say, Mr. Peter. I sounded this fellow (Landless you said, sir?) about the cottagers, mentioning them, casually by name. There was no notable reaction until I mentioned the painting gentleman. Even then he didn't say much, but there was that in his look. . . ." Wiggar shook his tidy head. "I think it was quite evident that there was no friendly association between the two."

"In any case—or I should say in this particular case of Mrs. Enfield's jewels being pawned in New York City—how could there be?"

Wiggar, recognizing it as a merely rhetorical question, only nodded as he put the finishing touch to the set of my collar and allowed me to depart with his unspoken approbation, amounting in his case to a carefully restrained blessing.

It was still fairly early and there was no one in the big living-room when I went downstairs. After the gay crowd of yesterday it looked very empty—empty and cold. For the first time the efficient central-heating plant appeared lacking in vitality. I remember shivering as I went over to the smouldering embers in the huge open fire-place. I threw on some kindling and a birch log, drew a high-backed chair close in front, took up a copy of *Yachting* and began to read.

About that time the outside door opened and Nelson Russell actually seemed to blow in. I caught a glimpse of him in an opposing mirror. There was no "life-of-the-party" smile on his face. His handsome, rather flamboyant features looked pinched and cold. He came straight to the fire and when he saw me his accustomed big business advertising manner slipped swiftly back into place.

"Cold out." He rubbed his hands, holding them out to the blaze. "Wife went to sleep as soon as we got back from our walk and I got bored with no one to talk to. Thought I'd run over to see what Don was doing, but before I got there, he and that pretty little school-teacher were already out on the lake. So I went on to Overton's, but he wasn't home either." He leaned closer to the fire and looked around, I thought rather curiously, at me. "You don't really like this infernal country in the winter either, do you?" he asked inquisitively.

"I think it's swell when there's plenty of excitement, like yesterday, and a nice warm house to wrap up in when one feels so inclined," I returned. "By the way, did you see Mr. Enfield while you were out?"

"No. Is he back from Portland already?" Russell looked disappointed. He turned hastily as Louise Enfield came down the stairs. "Why does Arnold have to come hustling back so soon, my pet?" he said, laughing as he went toward her, both hands extended. "He never gives me half a chance. Some day I'll——"

He did not finish. Enfield had come in by the side door. He stopped near it to pull off his short fur coat. His face was red with cold, but somehow he looked grim and old.

"Why, Arnold," his wife exclaimed, going to him. "Where have you been, dear? Is anything the matter? You look——"

"I'm all right," he said. "Just cold. Get me a drink, darling, will you?"

Her lovely eyes were wide, but she said nothing more. As she went hastily into the dining-room he came over to the fire. I looked at him questioningly but he would not meet my eyes. "Nothing doing," he muttered without turning his head. Louise came then with the whisky. He took it from her, poured a stiff drink, and swallowed it almost neat and in one breath.

CHAPTER XI

I DON'T remember anything special that happened at dinner that night. Max and his wife came up, but they didn't add much to the gaiety of the occasion. Max was morose and I thought Eugenia's rather inexpert make-up failed in its purpose, namely, to hide the fact that she had been crying. Quite naturally the talk shifted to the sporting events of the previous day, which did not help matters so far as he was concerned, and when Ada Russell insisted on talking

at length on ART he became even more restive and angry. Perhaps his young bride's cooking was to blame for his ill humour, I thought, and let it go at that.

After dinner we played gin rummy. Max lost steadily and with such an ill grace that I, for one, was getting awfully bored. A surreptitious glance at my watch told me that it was nearing ten o'clock and I was wondering whether I could decently excuse myself and go upstairs, when, looking up, I saw Wiggar standing quietly just inside the dining-room door, his expressionless eyes fixed upon my face. When my own glance met his, he turned and vanished without word or sign.

At the end of that hand, while the score was being computed, I rose, wandered down the room and stopped to light a cigarette close by the heavy curtains that could be used to mask the dining-room entrance.

"Meadows just telephoned, sir." Wiggar's low voice came clearly through a small crack near the door jamb. "Mr. Goodhue went out before dark and hasn't come back yet. He thought he might be here. When I said he wasn't he became alarmed."

I untangled the pronouns without difficulty. "Before dark," I repeated. "Four hours or more. Odd, but not necessarily alarming." I spoke more confidently than I felt. Already the thought of what might happen to a man, alone on a lonely lake. . . . I asked quickly: "Has Meadows tried other places than this? The Rolf farm?"

"Yes, sir. He called there first. The young lady said Mr. Goodhue left her about five-thirty to come back across the lake."

"When did Meadows find that out?" My common sense was not strong enough to keep off a cold hand that seemed to be running soft dead fingers down my spine.

"Only a short time ago. He took it for granted at first that Mr. Goodhue had come here and forgotten to let him know he wouldn't be in for dinner. He just phoned to make sure, and to find out if he'd better get out the car before the snow is any deeper."

I glanced back down the long room and saw Arnold Enfield's eyes fixed upon me, alert, inquiring; expectant—of what? He half rose as I moved toward them. Louise must have been watching him for she exclaimed quickly: "What is it, Arnold? What's wrong?"

"I don't know," he said slowly, getting to his feet. "I thought——" He wet his lips and cleared his throat. "You spoke to someone just now, Clancy, didn't you? Is there anything—anything you want that I can get you?"

They were all looking at me now. I said quickly. "I guess there's nothing to be alarmed about, but Goodhue's servant just telephoned. My man took the message. It seems Goodhue went to take Miss Dangerfield home early this evening and there's been no word of him since."

"Oh, he must have stayed to supper over there." Louise frowned.

She wasn't alarmed or deeply concerned or else she was hiding it cleverly.

"That's what Meadows thought and then he figured his master must be here," I said. "However, failing that, it really is getting late. Half an hour would be ample for a good skater to cross the ice and even on foot it couldn't take more than an hour I should think, unless something happened."

A shocked comprehension of possibilities seemed to dawn in every mind. There fell a minute of constrained silence. Russell broke it. "How about Overton's ?" he hazarded nervously. "Couldn't he have gone there ?"

"You know the doctor and he have no use for each other," Max put in raspingly. "Why would——" He broke off, glanced hastily from one to the other and said no more.

"Still we might try Doctor Overton's," I suggested. Arnold nodded and crossing to a table near the foot of the stairs, picked up the instrument, gave a number—and waited.

I felt that general anxiety increased like a thickening fog in the ensuing quiet. Suddenly Enfield changed his position and spoke sharply : "That you, Doc ? Is Don Goodhue there ?" A slight pause. "I know that," he barked, "but we thought he might. . . . Well, for God's sake, you needn't jump down my throat. How'd I know you'd be asleep this early ? All right, go back to bed. . . . Yes, I suppose so. Good night."

"He says we'll probably find Don hanging around the little schoolteacher," was the discouraging report. They looked at each other and then at me. No one seemed to know what to say or do, though it was patent that apprehension was growing in every mind.

"Isn't there any other place he might have gone ?" I urged. "No other cottages open still ? No camp where he might have taken refuge if he became confused in the dusk and the falling snow ?"

One by one they shook their heads. Russell said : "All the people who came up for the races yesterday have gone. The last bunch left before four this afternoon."

"The hermit !" Mrs. Russell squeaked suddenly. "Maybe Don fell and broke his leg, or something, and the hermit found him helpless and—oo-oo-oo !"

"Don't do that, Ada," her husband barked. "Old Giles Landless keeps at his end of the lake. Besides he's harmless, or so Mary Rolf says, and she ought to know. If he found Don injured—or anything—he'd have brought him home or got word to somebody or——"

"You don't know that, Nelson," his wife cut back with a sound like tearing silk. "You think everyone is good and perfect. It's awfully sweet of you, but just the same, I have my own ideas. I'm not blind."

"Don't you think we ought to be doing something, Arnold ?" Russell interrupted in turn. "I don't know what, exactly."

Enfield looked at me and his face was taut with sternly controlled

emotion. Every other eye in the room followed his glance. There was no time to evaluate the shades of difference in the expression of each.

I said: "You may all be unnecessarily alarmed, but don't you think we'd better get a search party out at once? Wiggar!" I called, and he materialized again between the dining-room curtains. "Does anyone know how they went—Goodhue and the girl? Did they take his ice boat?"

"No, sir. They were on skates. Meadows is sure of that. He called a minute ago to say that Mr. Goodhue is still missing. He's going again down to the lake."

"He shouldn't go alone! Has he a light?"

"Yes, sir. I asked. A big lantern and a flashlight."

"All right. Now get together all the portable lights there are here and bring them in. Put on a warm coat and get started down to this shore."

"Take my chauffeur with you," Russell added. "What next, Clancy?" He showed no symptom of being eager to go himself.

I turned to Arnold who seemed half-stunned—dazed. "Will you telephone farmer Rolf and see if he can get a party started from that side? It's dark and snowing and we'll need all the help we can get. As soon as you've finished I'll get on to the nearest constabulary barracks. It may be unnecessary but in a case like this it's well to cover all the angles. If we find Goodhue is hurt, disabled, Overton's the nearest doctor, I suppose. We could take him there?"

"Possibly," Enfield answered. His face was grim and hard. "It'll be time enough—Don't let's borrow trouble." He turned away hurriedly and called the Rolf farm.

"That was Mary," he announced after a minute. "Jared had gone to bed but she's getting him up. She'll phone his brother, the sheriff, and her son Tom as well. They'll start out from that side as soon as she can get them together."

"All right," I said. I had already found the number of the State Constabulary headquarters in the book and was about to take up the phone when Max said: "Don't you think you're making a great fuss about this, Mr. Clancy? After all, the lake isn't so very big. I shouldn't think it would take so many persons to cover the route Goodhue would be bound to take coming back from Rolf's farm. Why—why call in outsiders?"

"It usually simplifies matters to notify the police as early as possible in a case like this," I answered quickly but quietly. "The State troopers are picked men and can be of great assistance. If Goodhue has met with an accident in these weather conditions it may be serious. You must see that."

Mrs. Russell uttered a little squeaky moan as I picked up the phone. The rest listened in silence while I talked with Sergeant Keyes.

"He's bringing another man and they'll come in from Rolf's

side." I glanced about at the anxious, expectant faces. "We'd better get going from this shore." I handed Max one of the lanterns Wiggar had brought in, and Russell and Arnold each a flashlight. I had my own, so there were enough to go around. Louise and her daughter-in-law wanted to come with us, but already there was a dread upon me as to what we might—or might not—find, and I vetoed the proposition, as did Max and Arnold, with even more force and decision.

Quickly we pulled on heavy wraps and started. It had grown colder. The snow was sifting down in fine, persistent flakes that swirled and settled but did not make very fast. Glare ice under the thin coating made walking treacherous and skating not much better, though most of us chose skates, since we could cover the lake so much quicker that way. I found to my satisfaction that I could keep up with the others. We arranged to stay in a group going north along shore until we got to a place where a person might be expected to cross from Rolf's landing to reach the end of the path leading up from Goodhue's boat-house. There we spread out and Arnold, to whom the route would be best known, took the lead.

It was only a minute or two before I called out to him. "Aren't we hitting too far north? It seems to me——"

"Springs in there," he called back sharply. "Look out and don't go too close. Hard to see the sign." He swung his flashlight in a wide arc. "There it is. Just behind. See? We're all right now," and he started forward with increased speed.

"Wait," I cried. "A minute! Just suppose——"

Arnold circled back on one skate and stopped near me. "Don knows his way about," he said urgently. "He'd never get into trouble there, and we might. Let's cover his probable route first."

He was off again, the others following, before I could answer. I thought, grimly, that if a man went through the ice there he wouldn't be able to use any help that came hours later, and took my place in the line again.

We were half-way across when we saw specks of moving light on the farther shore. They, too, spread out, coming toward us. Presently we joined them. I was surprised to see two women in the party. Constance and Mary Rolf. Jared was there, also Tom Burton and the two troopers who had made good speed on a police motor-cycle. The sheriff didn't come until later.

"Any tracks would be covered of course." Keyes brushed the snow from his cap and looked at me I thought rather pointedly. "We're pretty well up against it. You haven't seen anything, sir, I suppose."

(At the time I was distinctly puzzled by his manner, which had a deferential quality, different in some curious way from that which he showed to any other person and seemingly out of all proportion to the discrepancy of age and apparent position. The thought registered in passing and was as quickly dismissed.)

In answer to his question I only shook my head. "What do we do now?" I asked.

He grinned slightly. "Don't you think we'd better cover the lake entirely? Mr. Goodhue was on skates when he left Miss Dangerfield."

"What time was that?" I interrupted.

Keyes turned to her and drew her into the circle of our combined lights. Her lovely face was cold and white as marble and her eyes looked like deep pools of pain and fear, but she answered my question steadily.

"It must have been half-past five or perhaps a few minutes later," she said, "when Mr. Goodhue started back."

"Connie was home by quarter to six," Mrs. Rolf stated definitely. "I looked at the clock when she came in."

"Right," I said. "Did Goodhue head directly for home, Miss Constance? Did you see?"

"No." She hesitated. "At least—I'm not sure. I thought perhaps he was going to Mrs. Enfield's, but if he didn't? . . . No? Then I think—— Oh, what use is it to stand here guessing? I only saw him starting off before I went up to the house. He may have wanted exercise. He may have gone anywhere."

"It was snowing then," I said.

"Yes, but not heavily. It was lovely coming over. There was no reason why he shouldn't have taken a turn around the lake, and if something happened—an accident——" She stopped short, biting her lips.

"Come on," said the sergeant sharply. "We're wasting time."

He looked at me and I thought by the set of his lips that he already sensed my dread of what we might find.

CHAPTER XII

I NEEDN'T go further into the cold horror of that search. When the sheriff came with more men he ordered his brother to take the women home. Jared complied reluctantly and was back again before long. We quartered the lake, yard by yard, even the north reaches, though they seemed far out of bounds. The sheriff went ashore, knocked at Landless' cabin and came back shaking his head. He had insisted on going inside, evidently not too trustful of the hermit's word, but had found nothing to indicate that the old man knew anything about Goodhue's disappearance.

"He's a crusty old dog," Sheriff Rolf commented angrily as he rejoined us, and afterward I was surprised to see the picturesque figure of the recluse on the outskirts of our branch of the party of searchers. I didn't see him exchange a word with anyone until some time later.

It had stopped snowing by then and the moon was out, full and

round and serene. The lake lay like a great sheet of white velvet, scalloped around the edges with black and grey shadows. A crust was forming in the quiet freezing air and most of us unscrewed our skates and walked.

It was long after midnight when Sergeant Keyes came close and spoke to me in a low voice. "I don't see anything more we can do until morning. Do you, Mr. Clancy? He either went clear off somewhere, or else——"

"He's gone through the ice," I finished when the trooper stopped.

"That's right," he agreed grimly. "And that narrows it down. The fishing holes are too small to be dangerous. There's only one place where springs show up far enough out from shore to be risky. You know where that is. I saw you stop a little while ago to look."

"It's more or less in the direct line a person might take coming across from the farm," I said. "Those little cedars stuck in the ice are far apart. A man might skate in between them anywhere and leave no trace. I noticed one of them was down. . . ."

"Yes. Could have been the wind, though," Keyes objected. "And if he'd come straight over when he left Constance Dangerfield it would still have been light enough to see the danger sign in the middle."

"They were all certain that he couldn't have mistaken the place. Everybody knew about it and avoided it," I commented.

"But what if he didn't come straight across?" I turned sharply to find Landless at my elbow. He was speaking in a low oddly muffled voice. "Couldn't he have skated around until it grew dark, too dark. There was a while when the snow was falling fast and thick. Anyone could make a mistake. . . ."

The sheriff's party had come in while we were speaking. "Eh?" he exclaimed, crowding closer. "What's that he says?"

It was the trooper who answered. "He thinks what we all must believe, I guess. Unless Goodhue has gone clean off somewhere on some purpose of his own without letting anyone know, he got lost somehow and blundered into the thin ice over near his own place. Of course we can still hope for the best, but in any case"—he paused significantly—"there's nothing more we can do until morning and you may as well all go home."

He took the sheriff aside and they spoke together for several minutes while the half-frozen searchers drifted wearily away in groups of two or three, almost too exhausted further to discuss the night's efforts or to speculate on the probable outcome of those of the morning.

It was nearing eleven o'clock that Saturday morning when Donald Goodhue's body was recovered. It had been a cold arduous business, dreadful to watch. They worked from a raft made of the painter's boat-house doors lashed together. The cracking ice echoed hollowly as they pushed the clumsy floor across it from spot to spot where it

seemed thinnest, for there had been some surface freezing during the night.

No word was spoken when the retarded action of the grapnel gave the first indication that the ghastly fishing was at an end; only the tenseness of the crouched figures on the raft was more eloquent than any speech.

They laid him out on the wet planks. His keen chiselled features were more serene than they had ever appeared when informed by his restless grasping spirit. There were no signs of a struggle with the icy element into which he had plunged. His eyes were open and his lips slightly parted.

Someone went for Doctor Overton and he was there when we entered the dead man's beautiful quarters. There was nothing he could do, he asserted, almost angrily. Goodhue had been dead for hours. That said itself. But for how many, who could say? In a freezing temperature it was quite impossible to determine. . . . And what difference did it make whether the accident occurred shortly after five-thirty, which was the approximate time he left Miss Constance, or later? When a man went through the ice and failed to get out again, it made no difference to him whether it was early or late.

The coroner, who arrived soon after, agreed perfectly with his distinguished colleague. He didn't think an inquest was at all necessary and forthwith wrote out a certificate of accidental death by drowning.

So the notice appeared in the papers and so it stands on the records to this day.

ENTR'ACTE I

A GREAT, round, golden moon hung low above the purple waters of the Gulf. When Peter Clancy stopped I found myself shivering in spite of the soft, warm air that blew across the sands. The rustle of the palms that swayed above us sounded secret and fraught with meaning.

"That isn't the end of the story, Peter," I breathed. "Surely not the end. You can't leave it like that. You know—you *know* you said that Donald Goodhue was murdered. And you've told enough to make me suspect—suspect plenty! You must tell me, right now! Who killed him? Who? And why?"

"God knows," Peter answered heavily. "Perhaps I could be mistaken. Nothing ever was proved. The whole thing was hushed up, as you know. I wish to heaven I hadn't been there, but being there I had to go on until I came to a dead end. . . . After all, except for his undoubted genius, it seems as if Goodhue must have been worthless and worse. And sometimes I get fed up with playing the part of Nemesis."

"I can't see you in a female impersonation, Peter," I said, trying to shake off the mood that was upon us. "Old Nemesis was a goddess, wasn't she?"

He laughed, but there was no gaiety in it. "I did try to play a feminine *rôle* once and succeeded all right, too. Believe it or not, I caught the crook I was after, but it was at night and he was drunk as a lord. Shall I tell you about that?"

"Some other time," I said quickly. "There's more to the Maine story, and I know it. You've got to tell me, Peter, or I won't sleep o' nights."

"I can't give you anything conclusive, my dear," he returned soberly. "If you insist I'll go on with what happened afterwards and you can draw your own conclusions. I shan't give you mine. Because I may be prejudiced. . . . And I certainly don't believe there's enough evidence to secure a conviction . . . even supposing I'm right. Anyhow, let's put it off until to-morrow. It's late. And things seem less ghastly in the light of day."

The Florida sun that morning was bright and beautiful. The sky was never clearer nor the water more blue and at peace, and yet, as Peter talked, I seemed to feel an icy edge on the balmy tropic breeze, and the aromatic pine scrub changed to tall snow-laden giants of fir and balsam, hemlock and spruce.

We settled ourselves once more against the curved roots of the ever-whispering palms and Peter began:

A man who want to
read it must use
powder of Antimony before starting
Hamed

PART TWO

PETER'S STORY CONTINUED

CHAPTER XIII

I WASN'T satisfied. No, God help me, not even from the first. There was something strange about the whole affair. At the earliest possible minute I went back down to the shore. Wiggar stayed behind to help his confrère, Meadows, with what apparently was to Goodhue's faithful servant a solemn duty; his last good office for his dead master. Sergeant Keyes, with no prompting on my part, followed me down. By common consent we stopped at the bottom of the steep path and looked across the ice to the fatal spot where several men, under the sheriff's orders, were roping off the area of possible danger, and riding hard on the little crowd of curious neighbours that had already gathered.

"It must have been very dark," the trooper muttered, voicing my own thought. "Those little cedar tops don't hold snow to any extent. They'd have shown up black against the ice in any kind of decent light, and I don't see how Goodhue could have been skating so fast as not to notice the big red sign in the middle before he was dangerously close, unless there was little or no light left. Of course a man skates with his head down if he's going against the wind. It veered to the north in the afternoon and what breeze there was would have been against him, but it died down almost to a calm soon after dark, if you remember, though it was fairly strong up till then."

"Yes," I said. "I think that's right. Seems queer altogether, somehow. Goodhue had been coming up here, winter and summer, for years, I understand. He certainly knew about these springs. They're fairly near his own shore. . . . Must have gone around them hundreds of times. He was a good skater, I suppose?"

"One of the best, I understand," Keyes replied. "He said he wasn't going to race Thursday morning because he wanted Constance Dangerfield to win. I heard him tell her so."

"Hmm! Know anything about that business?" I asked quickly.

He shook his head. "Only rumour. They say she was in love with him, but I don't know anything about it myself. I had an idea that she liked Tom Burton. But that was before Goodhue came up with the summer crowd for over Christmas and kind of discovered the beautiful new school-teacher. He stayed on when the others went back to the city. Gossip had it that he was chasing after her for no good. I know Mary Rolf very well. She talks a lot, but when something matters to her she can keep silent in nine languages, as

they say. But just the same I, for one, could see she was worried about the girl. You know she's been boarding at the Rolf farm ever since she began teaching in September."

"You're well up on local affairs," I remarked absently.

"My people live in Abbotsville," Keyes returned. "In a small town everybody watches the new school-teacher, especially if she's pretty."

I glanced aside at the young trooper, wondering if he might not be rather smitten in that direction himself. If so, there was nothing in his clean-cut serious face to betray him. At once my mind snapped back to more immediate considerations.

"There's another thing that bears out the idea that it was very dark when the accident happened." I pointed to the boat-house, a rather large rambling affair with a series of bath-houses attached, the dark green sides of which stood out boldly against the steep snowy promontory behind it. "In the daylight, or even at dusk, this would make a conspicuous mark to steer by. Surely Goodhue knew that he couldn't come in on a straight line from Rolf's landing without circling north of the springs."

"Or cutting inside close to the edge," Keyes observed. "There's good ice along shore all the way up from Enfield's. But I guess it would be shorter to circle around to the north of the thin ice."

I agreed automatically. That would be the better way if one were coming from the farm across the lake. . . . I didn't add aloud an unpleasant thought that suddenly struck. Since there was good ice in-shore and if, as Constance had suggested, Goodhue had actually intended to call at the Enfield's, he might have taken that route home. . . . After he had made that same call? Had he come—and gone—before I got downstairs? Was it possible that he was somewhere in the house when Arnold drove in from Portland? And when, after my revelation of the painter's abominable purpose in re Louise's picture, Arnold had rushed out to find him, had Goodhue then only just left?

The trooper's voice cut across my wretched imaginings. "The question to me is," he said, "where was Goodhue in the meantime between daylight and dark? It seems certain that he started back at approximately five-thirty last night. It wasn't real dark until after six and hardly then. I know that because I was out on the road. There was some snow falling but not much, and the clouds were so thin that the moon shone through aplenty, so I could see the road and things until quite late for this time of year."

"It wouldn't be very unnatural for a man who had been working in the house all day to stay out skating around for an hour or so," I contended with more heat than I had meant to show. The sergeant gave me a quick sharp glance but said nothing.

I was remembering that Russell had not seen Arnold on the road when he (Russell) came in. . . . Though he should have if our host had taken that route to Goodhue's place. . . . Perhaps there was

a short cut that I didn't know about. . . . Arnold was also a good skater. . . . He was in a hurry. Would he have preferred the ice ?

That question was not to be answered immediately. Wiggar came, hastily seeking me, and asked to speak to me in private. With a word of apology I moved aside and after a minute's hesitation I saw with relief that the trooper was going out to join the sheriff who still lingered at the scene of the tragedy.

For Wiggar's news was something that added fuel to the banked fire of my own anxieties.

"I have been assisting Meadows in attending to his late master's body," he said rather breathlessly. "We found a condition that I think you'd wish to see for yourself, sir. Meadows is terribly upset, and doesn't know which way to turn. I told him you had had some experience in such matters and he agreed to let me call you before he did anything else. I left it to you, Mr. Peter, to enlighten him further if you saw fit."

"Right," I commended as we climbed the steep path. "What was the condition, Wiggar ? What did you see ?"

"A bruise, sir," he managed to say though we were both breathing pretty hard. "Unaccountable position for the injury, or so it seems to me. Couldn't see how it could possibly have been self-inflicted or due to an accident. But you'll know best, sir. Here we are. This way."

Practical Wiggar, with characteristic *sang froid* had helped to dispose the body between clean sheets laid on the table-like top of three laundry tubs in the big kitchen. The frozen clothing had been thawed out and removed.

Meadows stood by with a strange look on his round clean-shaven and usually bland countenance. Wiggar raised a corner of the sheet. Across the nude back, just above the hips, slanting upward from left to right, was a long dark terrible bruise.

"How did he get that ?" Meadows asked in a sibilant whisper. "What could have done it ?" He turned slowly and raised his light, protuberant eyes to mine, searching, questioning. "*Who* could have done it ?" he finished on a failing breath.

"What ? Or who ? Those were staggering questions to be added to the others that were racing through my mind. Could Goodhue possibly, by any chance, have struck something under the ice ? Or, in plunging through, could the broken edge be supposed to make a mark like that ? He was wearing a heavy sweater over a woollen shirt. And he had suffered a terrific blow. The skin was unbroken, naturally, but what natural cause could have left that mark on the pale dead flesh ?

And the alternative ? That, too, was puzzling, if one tried to consider it. How had a human hand caused such an injury ? The weapon first. . . . That might have been a long very heavy stick

of wood or a bar of metal. . . . I tried to picture it. . . . A man, bent over as he skates? Yes. That might be. . . . And a larger, stronger man coming up from behind. Unheralded. Skates make little noise on clear ice. Wouldn't they make still less if muffled by a light fall of snow?

There was the dusk of evening to cloak the doer and the deed. The provocation? Weren't Goodhue's character and sinister activities enough to stir any man's blood to sudden fury? There, ahead, were the holes and soft places of thin ice; a practical, suggestive, alluring element in a picture of anger and revenge. . . . One heavy blow—and the body quickly disposed of. An old verse I had heard in childhood slipped back into my conscious mind:

"And if the red clad fishers found
"A dead man lying on the ground
"Why, who should say—but he was—drowned."

"Beg pardon, sir." Meadows' sharp interjection brought me back to the present.

I wasn't aware that I had spoken aloud. Hastily I roused myself. "Get Doctor Overton to come here at once, Meadows. Don't take no for an answer," I said. "There's no use mentioning it, in the meantime, to anyone else."

"Yes, sir. Thank you, sir." Meadows started but Wiggar intervened. "I'll attend to it," he said sympathetically and disappeared into the butler's pantry where, with one ear, I heard him make the call, though all the while I was questioning Meadows and studying his reactions.

"I don't know whether Wiggar mentioned, or you perhaps inferred, Meadows, that by profession I am a private investigator."

He was drawing the sheet back into place. His hand paused instantly, but for an instant only. "No, sir. I mean, I see, sir." His pale gaze came round, rested on my face for a second and, returning to the matter in hand, the sheet was respectfully put smooth and the well-trained servant was a well-trained servant again—and nothing more.

"Did anything happen after I left here yesterday at noon, Meadows? Anything out of the ordinary?" I began.

"Nothing, if I take your meaning, sir. I cleared the studio of boxes and such things and was out in the garage packing some paintings to go to New York for exhibition when Miss Dangerfield came."

"Paintings!" I exclaimed, suddenly on the *qui vive*. "What paintings were they? Can you describe them?"

"Oh, yes, sir. Quite so, sir. I've always been greatly interested in the master's work. There were but four. One was of a young woman in a sort of ballet costume."

"Yes. All right. Never mind going into that. We can look, later, if it seems advisable."

Meadows hesitated. "I'm afraid not, sir. I mean not at once. Mr. Donald was in a great hurry to get them off and I took them to the express office, starting just after the young lady came to pose."

Was that Goodhue's idea of killing two birds with one stone? I thought angrily. Was he afraid of Arnold's reactions if that painting of his wife were still within reach? Also, what a nice excuse that was for getting Constance all to himself. And that was when I first began to wonder if something had happened to the girl that afternoon. Had Goodhue exceeded the proprieties? Had he, perhaps, made advances then, or afterward, that roused to fury the instincts of an innocent but certainly spirited young woman?

There was only her word for it that the painter had gone clear across the lake with her. . . . Wait a minute. What did Russell say about that? He had started for Don's but saw him and Constance out on the ice. Better check on how far out. . . . Only, it didn't seem possible that a girl could have perpetrated such a deed. Yet she looked very strong and was certainly as active as most men. What was done, however accomplished, couldn't have taken long. She might well have reached the farmhouse by quarter to six—or there was little doubt in my mind that Mary Rolf might be expected to approve any act the girl would be led into under certain provocation and was quite capable of lying in her behalf if she thought it necessary.

These ideas—and others—rushed through my mind with lightning speed. There was only a minute of silence before I went on to ask Meadows what time he left the house and when he got back to the studio.

"It's less than an hour's drive to Fairfield," he replied without hesitation. "I attended to shipping the crate of paintings and came straight back. It must have been about five-thirty when I looked into the studio and saw that Mr. Donald was out."

"Then the last time you saw him alive was when Miss Dangerfield came?"

"That's correct, sir."

"It would have been around three-thirty?" He nodded and I went on quickly. "He expected then to be here to dinner? He instructed you what to serve?"

"No, sir. That he rarely did unless he was expecting guests. I know——" Meadows cleared his throat and corrected himself: "I knew his tastes very well after nine years of service and he was inclined to leave everything to me."

"You weren't specially surprised, I understand, when he didn't show up at dinner-time."

"Not at all, sir. His mind was full of more important things, he was very much in demand, and it was quite customary for him to dine out unexpectedly without bothering to let me know. If the weather had been clear it might have been much later last night before I endeavoured to locate him. When I did so, it was because I thought that perhaps he wasn't in a position to notice how the snow

was already drifting and I was afraid that I wouldn't be able to get the car out later if he required it." The man's voice trailed off to a mournful silence.

I heard Wiggar hang up the telephone receiver. He came in quietly merely bending his head to indicate that he had succeeded in getting the doctor to come over and did not interrupt the short examination.

I tried to give my next question no special hint of importance. "Did Mr. Goodhue have any callers yesterday afternoon or evening, Meadows?"

"You mean after I came home? No, sir, not even a phone call."

I felt my heart skip a beat. "You're sure of that, Meadows?" I was afraid my voice sounded insistent in spite of my efforts to the contrary, but he seemed not to notice anything unusual.

"Yes, sir. Quite sure."

"You were here all the time? You didn't go out for anything?"

He looked up then and I thought his eyes narrowed slightly. He spoke with precision and very firmly. "I wasn't out of the house after I put the car up. I had the dinner to get. That kept me busy until seven o'clock when I was ready to serve as usual. Mr. Donald not being home as yet, I put the dinner back and kept it hot—or cold, as the case might be—until eight-thirty. After which I cleared away and listened to the kitchen radio. Later, when I looked out and saw the snow, I called first the Rolf farm and then Mr. Enfield's cottage. After that—you know all that happened, sir."

I said, "Yes," and hoped I was right; hoped I had seen without missing the implication of any subsequent subtle word or act. For there was no doubt in my mind then that Donald Goodhue had met his death at the hands of a person or persons unknown, and I dreaded to be obliged to learn what account Arnold Enfield could give as to where he had been and what he had done after he left my room at approximately half-past five the night before with curses on his lips and hate in his heart.

CHAPTER XIV

"WHAT'S the matter? What the hell do you want now, Mr. Clancy? And what business is it of yours anyway?" The doctor's manner was no longer that of the good (though somewhat inebriated) companion of Thursday. He looked sharply around at Meadows and Wiggar who were the only other persons in the large well-appointed kitchen. "You haven't any authority here." His eyes came quickly back to me, though they met mine for an instant only, and then dropped to the top button of my cardigan.

I said: "Investigations of this kind are strictly my business, Doctor. Mr. Enfield will tell you so if you care to ask him."

Again his weary disillusioned eye flashed up to mine and fell once more. "The police?" His whole expression was one of uncertainty and doubt.

"No. Just a private detective."

"Eh?" Overton's chin jerked up. "What's any kind of a detective visiting at Arnold's for?"

"He invited me—not in my official capacity," I said truthfully. "But, being on the spot, and having attention called to certain matters, it's my duty, as a private citizen with special experience, at least to get a competent opinion on the evidence in hand."

"Humph," Overton grunted. "What makes you think I'm competent? You must know that I'm not practising any more and I dare say you haven't needed anyone to tell you why." His tone was the essence of bitterness.

"I don't think the coroner is an able man and I know you can't help being one still, Doctor Overton," I said, crossing over and lifting the edge of the sheet. "I want your opinion of this before I do anything further."

I heard the breath come sharply through his lips. "Good God!" The expression of his face changed completely. He was keen, able. suddenly sober and curiously watchful as he drew near and with slender experienced fingers explored the region of the livid bruise.

We waited, the two servants and I, in tense expectant silence. At last, very slowly, Overton replaced the sheet and stood, his back partly turned toward the room, looking down at his hands as they lay on the edge of the covering.

"What is your opinion now, Doctor?" I asked grimly. "Do you still think Donald Goodhue met his death by drowning?"

His glance shifted warily, but his voice was firm and determined. "Yes," he said definitely. "The spine may be seriously injured. I think it is. In which case he was paralysed from there down. The shock would probably have rendered him helpless, but he wouldn't have died instantly. There's little doubt that he would have been breathing still when he went through the ice. So there would be water in the lungs and the coroner's certificate of death by drowning is, in my opinion, entirely correct."

He removed his hands then and thrust them into the pockets of his fur coat, but not before I had seen that they were trembling.

"Then how do you explain that bruise?" I asked.

"I don't," the doctor replied shortly. "And I don't have to. That's your business. Personally I don't think the deceased was worth raising a stink about, but if you do, go to it."

"Look here, Doctor," I said, getting between him and the door toward which he had started, "you don't think, do you, that there's any possibly innocent explanation of such an injury?"

He paused then and regarded the toe of his boot with a particularity that it hardly seemed to deserve. "You figure that out for yourself, Clancy," he said in a less heavy tone. "Personally, if I

wanted to do a man in, as they say, I'd be apt to hit higher. The *medulla oblongata*. The base of the brain. That's about the most vulnerable spot. And he wasn't wearing a helmet, so there was nothing to interfere. Then death would have been instantaneous and there'd be a probability that the death certificate might not be proper as it now stands. But in the circumstances I see no reason to question its accuracy."

"Technically, then, of course, you would be inclined to testify that he was drowned," I admitted, "but that back injury will continue to make me uneasy until I can account for it."

The physician brushed that aside with a wave of the hand. "I grant you it was a curious accident," he said. "But wouldn't it be absurd to think somebody could have done it intentionally and made such a bad job of it? If you're a good detective the reasons against any such theory must have occurred to you already."

At that, I don't know why, I felt suddenly that Overton was withholding something. That he knew or suspected something that had a definite bearing on the case. There was no time to question him further for at that minute Sergeant Keyes came past the window, saw us, and entered quickly.

He glanced curiously at the doctor and then at me. "Anything new?" he asked hastily.

I had no intention of running foul of or not playing fair with the police. "You'd better see," I said and led the way across to the shrouded figure.

I thought Overton's first impulse was to leave, but if so he changed his mind and instead came nearer while Keyes made a brief examination. After which he asked for the doctor's opinion and had, in substance, the same answers that I had received, tending toward the conclusion that on the whole nothing probable could ever be definitely determined as to the cause of so mysterious an injury and that the State would far rather save the taxpayer's money and let sleeping dogs lie, especially since a queer accident is far more common than a stupid attempt at homicide that, in such a case, must have been effected by a series of fortuitous circumstances.

I could see by Wiggar's face that he was intensely interested and was probably laying away the physician's sixty-cent words for future use. On the other hand, Meadows' countenance had lost much of its professional composure. As soon as Overton left (which he did immediately after) the man stepped forward and keeping his voice down with a visible effort appealed to Sergeant Keyes.

"Are you going to let Doctor Overton get by with that, sir?" he asked. "He would prefer that there shouldn't be an inquiry, I'm sure. It would lead to publicity, you see. And even if he knows nothing more than he says about the cause of my master's death, there's plenty of reason why the doctor would hate to be mixed up in another scandal."

"What d'you mean by that ?" Keyes asked so harshly that Meadows seemed to shrink together as he backed away.

"Nothing, sir," he said hastily. "Nothing but what everybody knows. Doctor Overton ruined himself by drink and wishes to remain quite retired, as you and Mr. Clancy must have realized for yourselves."

"All right," the trooper agreed curtly. "Let it go at that. But it's not good medicine to make dirty sounding cracks unless you have something to back 'em up. See ? You can go along now. I want to have a word with Mr. Clancy."

I nodded to Wiggar and he went out with Meadows, closing the door behind him. It was then that I got the explanation of Keyes' deferential attitude that had puzzled me the night before. It seemed he had been a buddy of Lieutenant Michael Shannon of the New Jersey State Police and had known all about me when I appeared at Enfield's party; unexpectedly, so far as he was concerned for, though it actually was he who had suggested us in connection with the jewel robbery, he knew of no professional reason for my being included in the recent festive occasion.

These matters were passed over without elaboration and in the shortest possible time. At the end Keyes said, "I'd consider myself fortunate, Mr. Clancy, if you would give me the benefit of your advice at this point. Frankly I'm not sure what my duty really is. Being a state trooper I'm mainly concerned with the highway patrol and such like, of course. But if this is in any sense a case of homicide it certainly should be brought to the notice of the county officials. Sheriff Rolf is still out on the lake, I think. I suppose I ought to call him. On the other hand, it seems quite as likely that it was an odd kind of freakish accident. . . . Don't you think so ?"

"You would be glad if I could say 'yes' to that, Keyes ?"

"Well, to be perfectly honest, I would, Mr. Clancy. You see none of the people—I mean the native population of the county—was very happy over Milt Rolf being made sheriff. He's decent enough, I guess, but he's tarnation lazy and his brain doesn't weigh so much it would make him round-shouldered. See what I mean ?"

"What about the coroner ?"

"Oh, Doc Smilley is all right. He's a shy old man, but stubborn. He's given a certificate of death by drowning and he'll stand by that till hell freezes over unless there's overwhelming proof the other way."

I considered that for a minute. Then I asked : "What about Goodhue's relatives ?"

"He hadn't any that anyone knows about. I looked into that earlier this morning. Meadows says he's been in Goodhue's service for nine years, come February, and he's never heard of any nearer than some distant cousin that touched his boss for a loan a couple of years ago. The letter was chucked in the wastepaper-basket and Meadows has no idea what the name was, let alone the address. I

asked Mr. Enfield and his other friends but they couldn't give us a hint. Apparently we can't get authority for disposal of the body until we've gone through his papers—if then. And what is the sheriff to do if we find nothing? Advertise, I suppose." Keyes stopped uncertainly.

"In the meantime," I said, "what about an autopsy?"

"You would advise that, Mr. Clancy?"

"Yes," I said.

"Well—if it must be——"

"Don't take my word for it," I interrupted. "But suppose you took it upon yourself to ignore the obvious indication that this wasn't a perfectly simple case of drowning. How can you be sure Meadows won't talk? And if the thing gets spread around, wouldn't it affect your position with the rest of the police if you were wise to the evidence and said nothing?"

The trooper's brow cleared. "You're a pal, sir, if you don't mind my saying so. I'll call in the sheriff and after that it's up to him and the coroner. I can wash my hands of the whole business—and they probably won't do anything either."

Sergeant Keyes left then. Left me to wonder why it was that all the persons concerned so far seemed so very much more than willing to have Goodhue's death ascribed to unavoidable accident—all but Meadows—and after due deliberation it seemed to me that even his objections, if such they might be called, had been pursued only half-heartedly.

CHAPTER XV

I HAD some difficulty in getting Arnold alone that afternoon. It wasn't that he appeared to be avoiding me, but Louise thought he wasn't looking well at lunch and insisted that he lie down afterward. She remained beside his couch in the living-room, reading, and I had no excuse for suggesting a private interview.

Then, too, as soon as Mrs. Russell signed (or whined) off the air for her afternoon nap, her husband cornered me in the library.

"Darned queer thing about Donald's death," he said, drawing up a high-backed confidential chair. "Practically everybody around here will be glad the gods were so co-operative as to wipe him and his scores off the slate. Personally, I admired the man. He had genius. Nobody could deny that he was one of our foremost artists. That was what always has burned up poor young Max. The boy has no talent at all, only a complex that won't let him rest. The whole State of Maine will look better to him now that this corner of it is rid of such a successful and overbearing rival. Maybe you've noticed how thick little Eugenia lays on her admiration of Max's work. I don't think it fools him a hundred per cent. There was a good deal of talk going around up here the first summer they were

married. Arnold thought the boy ought to learn to be self-supporting. Took him into his office in Portland and Max was here only for week-ends. Don always made a play for every pretty woman that came along; they may have been together a good deal, he and Eugenia. I don't suppose there was any funny business, but Ada says a good many thought there was and that Max heard about it."

That started up a new train of thought which didn't please me either. I don't like gossip or gossipers any more than the next man, but in my job sometimes it's necessary to listen and even to encourage.

I said: "I was very much interested in Goodhue, but I can't say I liked him much either. I gather that he and Doctor Overton weren't friendly. Do you know why that was?"

Russell frowned thoughtfully. "I guess it was nothing more than general incompatibility." He seemed rather disappointed not to be able to suggest something more exciting.

"Too bad about Overton," I remarked. "Seems a terrible waste of good material. He must be very lonely up here except when his friends are up for the season."

"I'll say!" Russell agreed. "It would give me the willies, but he doesn't seem to mind. He goes off by himself even when some of us are up in the winter for a few days. I went over yesterday afternoon thinking I'd have a drink with the old chap before dinner and try to cheer him up, but he was off by himself somewhere, his door was locked and I didn't wait."

"It was nearly dark when you got back," I commented casually. "What would an elderly man be doing with himself out in the cold so late, do you suppose?"

"Search me," Russell replied. "I was glad enough to be back. It was beginning to get colder and the road was lonely as hell."

"Rather a long walk over there, too, I should think, unless there's a short cut," I said.

"There's no short cut." Russell shook his head. "But I love walking if I can stretch my legs and don't have to wait for someone that lags behind all the time."

I knew what the allusion was and smiled sympathetically. He poked the fire vigorously for a minute which seemed to relieve his feelings. When he desisted, I said: "You know, Russell, I believe you may have been the last person, except the young school-mistress, to see Goodhue alive."

"That's right." He assumed an air of importance. "I wouldn't be a bit surprised. I guess I told you I started out first to see the sketch Don painted of you yesterday morning. I wondered what he'd make"—a glance that didn't puff me up to any extent—"of a strong face like yours."

"But you saw him out on the ice," I prompted.

"Yes. He and Constance Dangerfield were just starting off in the direction of the farm. That is, they were skirting the upper edge

of that dangerous place where he was found this morning, where the springs are, you know."

I nodded. "You didn't see them on your way back?"

"No. I didn't see anybody. The snow was just beginning and I was in a hurry to get home to the fire."

The talk after that had no interest for me, though Russell burbled on until Louise joined us. He persuaded her at length to go out for a breath of fresh air. I declined joining them on some pretext and as soon as they were safely out of sight I went quietly into the living-room, to find Arnold awake and sitting up.

"Feeling better?" I asked.

"Yes," he answered, smiling a little. "I was really all right, but I never can resist letting Louise fuss over me. It's silly, of course. . . ."

There was something very appealing about the way he said that. When one sees devotion between two persons who have been travelling the long road, up hill and down, together for years, it somehow relieves the sting of Reno and of children thrust into boarding-schools from broken homes, one of society's most serious menaces. . . . And I found, quite suddenly, that I had grown deeply interested in these people, more than I would have thought possible in so short a time. There was a sturdy loyalty about Arnold Enfield that I both liked and admired. As to Louise, his wife, the romantic feeling she had aroused in my adolescent heart was not entirely the puppy-love of a stage-struck boy. There was something admirable and arresting about her; a kind of spell; a charm that was all her own, and I still felt it in spite of the equivocal quality of events that had conspired to bring me once more into her sphere of influence.

Thinking of all this, I must have appeared very unresponsive, for my host began to look at me apprehensively.

"What's on your mind, Clancy?" He spoke abruptly. "Are you—— Is there something you want to tell me?"

"Yes," I said. "It's about that picture you went over to see Goodhue about last night. Did you find out what had become of it?"

"No." He was suddenly alert. "Where is it? Do you know?"

"It's on its way to the New York galleries." I saw no advantage in mincing matters.

He clenched his hands and ground his teeth, muttering curses under his breath: "Even after he's dead, damn him! You'd think that would make him safe. . . . Couldn't do any more harm. . . ." He raised his voice. "We've got to do something, Clancy! We've got to stop it! You'll have to help me! What can we do?"

"Hold it," I said quietly. "Pipe down. Everything's changed now. There'll be legal formalities, inventories of his estate, and so forth and so on. It may be necessary to put off the exhibition until spring. In any case nothing can be done immediately, so you don't have to worry about that for the present. Put it out of your mind, Enfield; you must do that."

"How can I ?" He frowned heavily. "I was frantic last night when I couldn't find it."

I looked at him sharply. "What's that ?"

"I went over there you know." His glance was uncertain. "I told you I was going."

"Yes. And did you ?" I didn't emphasize the question but it seemed to strike him oddly, nevertheless, and to make him curiously uncomfortable.

"Well, yes, of course," he replied.

"Was Goodhue at home then ?"

He frowned more heavily still. "No. He was out."

"Then—what happened ?" He hesitated. "You'd better tell me," I urged.

"All right. There was nothing—— Only it may sound——" Apparently he made up his mind. "All right," he repeated, "I sneaked in, if you must know. The lights were on in the studio. I could see them shining up through the skylight. I had some idea it would give me an advantage if I came on him from behind, unexpectedly." He paused. I said, "I see," and he went on in short hurried sentences.

"We never lock our doors unless we're going away for good. I opened the front door without making any noise. There was no one around. I slipped into the studio. There was no one there either. I thought, this is my chance. I would have stolen that picture then and there, Clancy, if I could have found it. I'm telling you. And I wouldn't have hesitated. Of course I would have paid for it afterwards——"

"In more ways than one," I said severely. "You were lucky, as it happened. Meadows says that no one called at Goodhue's after he (Meadows) came home at about five-thirty last night."

"Oh ?" Enfield's eyes narrowed slightly. "You asked him about that, Clancy ?"

"Yes, I did," I admitted.

"Why ?" He pursed his lips.

"I wondered."

"You wondered about me ?"

"Yes, I couldn't quite make out several things."

"Such as——" The man's face was flushed.

"Why you were gone so long when it seemed certain afterward that Goodhue couldn't have been at home at the time."

"Well," he said shortly, "now you know."

"Yes," I said. "And why Meadows wouldn't have heard you, perhaps. Did you realize that he was in the house ?"

"I guess I didn't, just at first. But before I left I heard the radio going in the kitchen. It scared me some because I should have known by the lights being lit, that there was someone there all the time."

I thought he seemed relieved to have got this off his chest. Of

course the reaction could have been that of an upright man being troubled by a peccadillo like "felonious intent." I assured him that I didn't blame him for wanting to get the picture into his possession, that being nine points of the law, my only grounds for censure being that he would have been up against it if he had been caught in the attempt or if it had been successful and Goodhue had subsequently wanted to make a howl and take the whole works into court, which probably would have made it still worse.

"Since no one knows, it won't be necessary to say anything about it at all to anyone else, will it, Clancy?" he urged.

"I hope not," I returned. "Apparently no one saw you. Russell says he was coming back alone along the road about that time but he didn't meet anyone. How was that? Did you get off it somewhere to avoid him?"

"I didn't know Nelson was out," Arnold said slowly. "No. I didn't see him either."

"How do you account for that?" I asked casually.

And his answer came with almost no appreciable hesitation. "Perfectly simple," he said. "I skated up and back. It was quicker and easier than walking."

CHAPTER XVI

WELL, that was that, and I didn't stress the point further. It was Arnold who, in the course of conversation, volunteered the suggestion that Goodhue must have lingered on the opposite shore talking with Constance for longer than either she or Mary Rolf cared to admit since it was obvious that the accident couldn't have happened except after nightfall.

"He would have kept the girl out alone with him as long as he could," Arnold said bitterly. "He was that kind. She may even have some special reason for hating to mention anything about it. Not that I mean that as a slur on Constance," he added hastily. "She's a fine honest girl if ever I saw one, but that devil had a way with him. . . ."

He didn't go on and after a minute I said: "Russell saw them starting at about quarter past five or a little earlier. There was no sign of either of them, I suppose, when you were skating up to his place?"

He shook his head thoughtfully. "I don't believe I could have seen anyone on the far side of the lake at that time and it was dark when I came back, as you know."

"Right," I agreed. "Have you any idea how long you were actually there rummaging in his studio?"

He thought that over. "I couldn't be sure exactly. Let me see. . . . It's hard to tell. Maybe it was fifteen minutes; maybe half an hour. I don't really know. I was very much excited. And

angry. I didn't want to give up. And there were so many places to look." His breath came heavily, as if he were living again a tense and hateful experience.

"Does it occur to you, as it does to me," I said evenly, "that you may just barely have escaped being a witness to the tragic accident of Goodhue's death ?"

He turned his face slowly toward me and nodded. "Yes," he said on a sharply indrawn breath. "It's been haunting me ever since last night . . . when he couldn't be found. . . . I might have been near enough to help him if I'd known. . . ."

I thought then that he looked like a man torn by inner conflict, but I wasn't certain of the reason until afterward.

Keyes came back to talk things over with me while Arnold and I were still alone together, though we had adjourned to the open fire in the library. The two men were evidently on very familiar terms and it didn't seem to occur to the trooper that there was any possible reason for excluding his friend and patron (as I afterward found Enfield to be). In fact he appeared glad to find us together and his report was addressed to both of us on about equal terms.

He said that when he went down to the lake he found everybody had gone off to lunch except Tom Burton, whom the sheriff had asked to stay on guard in case a crowd came out from town, reporters from Fairfield, or even from Portland, maybe, or curiosity seekers who might get too close to the areas of dangerously thin ice. The reporters were to be referred to the sheriff, who had gone across to his brother's farm for dinner.

Keyes had gone around there on his motor-cycle, found the family still at table, and had accepted Mary's invitation to join them. As soon as Constance and Mary had gone to the far end of the kitchen and were busy with the dishes, the trooper approached the sheriff with Meadows' discovery and suggested that the coroner ought to see the body again with a view toward performing an autopsy and perhaps holding an inquest.

It was the first information (so far as I was aware) that Arnold had had of any possible cause of Goodhue's death, other than drowning. He was visibly upset when the matter was explained to him, though it would have been hard to say to what extent. Whether or not he immediately grasped the seriousness of my recent probings into his actions of the previous evening, I'm not sure. But it must certainly have come to him gradually if not at once.

Knowing nothing of the difficult conditions involved, Keyes breezed along efficiently with his recital.

"I laid it before the sheriff just as you advised, Mr. Clancy," he said, "and his reaction was about what I guessed it would be. He said, of course queer accidents like that spine injury might happen any time to anybody that batted around the way Goodhue did, and Jared said there were plenty of people on this side of the lake who

would like to have lambasted the man, only none of them would have the guts. (I'm just quoting, you know, Mr. Enfield.) They both agreed on that and Milt said no question at all but that it was accidental drowning, bruise or no bruise. Doc Smilley had seen it was obvious and not only that but Doctor Overton backed it up and that ought to be good enough for anybody. No use spending money on a dead issue. Dead, sure enough. (He thought that was funny.) Anyhow, he said, he wasn't going to order an autopsy or any such foolishness to prove what we already knew. If Doc Smilley wanted to be so curious, he'd have to do it on his own, and the sheriff would be darned if he'd O.K. any fee. It was up to me if I wanted to put it up to the coroner."

"And did you ?" Arnold asked. There was a nerve twitching in his cheek.

"Sure," the trooper answered easily. "You know Doc Smilley, Mr. Enfield. But I thought it was best to make sure I'd done all that could be expected of me as a law enforcement officer, so I swung over to Fairfield and caught the coroner just as he was leaving his house. He was in a great hurry to go to Mrs. Wigglesworth who's expecting her eighth, and I had to cut it fine. He understood the situation all right, however, but, naturally, he didn't want to bother if Milt Rolf thought it wasn't necessary. They all look up to Doctor Overton around here in spite of everything, because he's helped out in emergencies and when things looked hopeless, as you know, sir."

Enfield nodded but didn't interrupt the trooper's swift tale.

"So Smilley said that Doctor Overton concurred with his diagnosis of the situation and that should satisfy Goodhue's relatives when or if any turned up. So that's the way the matter stands," Keyes concluded, "and I guess we'll never know any more about it than we do now."

I suppose everybody should have been satisfied with the outcome of the trooper's efforts and apparently everyone was, except me. There was too much to be explained. Too many people who were glad, deep down in their hearts, that Goodhue was safely dead.

The Rolfs were worried about his attentions to the girl they were taking such an interest in. . . . And that included Tom Burton, or else I failed entirely in sizing up his attitude when he came to fetch her home from Goodhue's party. There was more than a casual interest in the breast of the able young carpenter. . . . He was his mother's idol, too. I had no doubt that she wanted Connie for a daughter-in-law. Wasn't she so keen to protect the girl that she had sent Jared over, not knowing that Tom had gone already ? If it was a serious case with the son it seemed a little odd that his mother wouldn't have inferred that he would have been on the job to protect his sweetheart from the wiles of the city wolf. . . . Was I making a mistake here ? Had I perhaps misinterpreted the young man's feelings ? And if not, were they strong enough to drive him

into committing a rash and wanton act? Was he the quiet dangerous type?

I didn't like that idea either, and turned hastily from it to other possible considerations.

For instance, there, as a matter of fact, was Nelson Russell. He was out, and alone, at what I began to be sure, in spite of medical uncertainty, was the critical time: namely, between say five o'clock (when it would have been too dark for Goodhue to paint any more) and approximately half past six or seven when there would scarcely have been visibility enough on the lake for a would-be murderer to recognize and attack his victim. For, unless the wrong man had been killed which seemed most improbable, the person who delivered that all-but-immediately-fatal blow must have been sure of Goodhue's identity; must have known him even when approached from behind since the position of the injury made any other method of attack entirely out of the question.

Russell didn't get in until after five-thirty. I knew that of my own knowledge. But if he had been on the ice it seemed as if he and Arnold must have met. Besides, what possible motives could Russell have had? None apparent, certainly, and if there were any they were still to seek.

Which last was not quite true of Max Enfield. Jealousy of another man's artistic ability plus a possible suspicion about his own young wife might be enough to spur an immature man to desperate action and the possibility had to be considered as such. So far, his alibi depended on Eugenia's statement and his by implication. Pretty flimsy material to build on, I had to admit, and for his family's sake if not for his own I was sorry.

At that period of my investigating thoughts, it hardly seemed possible that it could have been a woman's crime, and I skipped consideration of any of the women in the picture.

And that brought me around to Overton. . . . Where was he on the preceding evening when Goodhue made his exit from this mortal plane?

The last I saw of him that day he was out in his ice boat. That was shortly after four. According to Nelson Russell, he was still out when Nelson called at the doctor's camp somewhere between a quarter and half-past five. Further than that I had no evidence until about ten o'clock that same night when Arnold dragged him out of bed to answer the phone.

Who would know where he was in the meantime?

Suddenly I made up my mind. It was that blank period between tea and dinner, and like most of the others, I had retired to my room to rest—as if I could!

"Wiggar," I said, "I'm going for a walk. Keep your eyes open and if you need me for anything try Doctor Overton's."

"Yes, sir. Thank you, sir. You'll be back in time to dress."

"No!" I said emphatically. "Mr. Enfield said 'No,' and if you

henpeck me any more I'll never dress again, s'welp me! By the way, you don't know where I've gone, and don't call there unless it's absolutely necessary."

Wiggar's voice sounded hurt but he concurred in his customary formula: "Quite so, sir!"

CHAPTER XVII

"OH, it's you, Mr. Clancy."

Doctor Overton himself had answered my knock. I had heard a bolt slide back. Evidently what Arnold had said about no doors being locked as long as a cottager was in residence was not altogether accurate.

"Yes," I acknowledged a self-evident truth. "Clancy it is. May I come in?"

He stepped aside and motioned toward the fire but there was no cordiality in his manner. "Getting cold," he said grumpily, throwing on another stick. "Help yourself to a drink."

There was a stand near by on which were bottles and glasses. When I declined he did not urge it and somewhat to my surprise he took nothing himself but remained standing on the hearthrug evidently waiting for me to speak first. Which I did with the usual banal observation: "You have a nice cosy little place here, Doctor."

"Does well enough," he said absently. "I get along. Mary Rolf comes and cleans me up twice a week and Tom drags up a week's-worth of wood every Sunday morning. Otherwise I enjoy being alone."

His expression put an edge on the last sentence. Naturally I ignored it while I mentally jotted down a note: "No servants."

There was little light now coming through the big windows that looked out and down over the lake, but, in addition to the fire-light, a green-shaded lamp on the table illuminated the physician's brooding face as he bent over a thick block of paper lying there. Beside the waste basket on the floor lay several torn sheets.

"I hope I haven't interrupted some important bit of writing," I said tentatively.

"No." He raised his head. "Just a fad. I have some ideas about ice boat construction. Getting them down on paper as I work 'em out on a model I'm building in my boat-house below here on the shore. Tom Burton is helping at odd times. Thinks I've got something here. Know anything about ice boating?" He bent his head to look keenly over the tops of the spectacles he had put on. "No," he murmured. "I remember you don't." And pushed several written sheets together and out of the way.

"But I'm sure you're a pastmaster," I said, moving my chair to command a more direct view of his face. "It's a pity you didn't get into Thursday's race. I saw yesterday afternoon how expertly you

handle your own ice boat. She looked a good one too. What's her name ?"

"The *Derelict !*" His tone was almost savage. He pushed his chair back. "Look, Mr. Clancy, I don't believe you came over here to cheer up an old recluse out of politeness, same as some others do, confound 'em ! You've got something inside that red head of yours and I guess it ain't hay, as the saying goes. Maybe Arnold asked you up here because of your pleasing personality or something, and whether you're looking for a job of detecting or not I wouldn't know, but if you expect to combine business with pleasure by trying to make something out of Donald Goodhue's death, I warn you you'll be out of luck. This summer colony and others like it are the cash crop of the natives and they won't do anything to interfere with the peace and quiet of the customers if they can help it. You can prove nothing in this instance. The local police, from the sheriff down, will sidestep any inquiry or responsibility. Most of 'em are more or less indebted to Arnold for loans or political influence or other good offices—even Sidney Keyes of the state police—and none of them would be willing to make trouble for Arnold or any of his friends. Especially in regard to a skunk like Don Goodhue." He got up, kicked his chair out of the way and stamped over to the fire-place.

"The man does seem to have been generally disliked," I observed mildly.

"Disliked !" The doctor's face went almost purple. "Goodhue was a damned scoundrel. A genius, yes. I admit it. Makes it worse, seems to me ! Does it excuse meanness and filth when the gods pour a great gift into a man's cup ? No ! Maybe that's not the way to look at it. Maybe it's pathological. The brain of a genius may not have room in it for decency and honour. But the effect is purely vicious. Look what he was doing now ! Even yesterday ! The beast is better dead, and so far from hounding the person responsible for it, he should have a vote of thanks. Why, I could tell you——"

He brought himself up short and wiped his face which had come out all over beads of sweat. His glance swerved to the whisky bottle, then his head jerked back and he favoured me with a long persistent stare.

"Mr. Clancy," he said earnestly at last with a queer change of manner that would be effective on any stage, "I know your type. You're not a fool and you probably have your own ideas of what constitutes justice. Even you may still have ideals and spell it with a capital J. But in this case there's nothing to it. I'm telling you. Lay off it and let nature take its course."

"That's all very well, Doctor Overton." I was as earnest as he. "Only in my queer and varied experience one murder often leads to another. A man who has once killed is always afterward a potential killer and——"

"No!" The doctor cut in, sharp and determined. "Not in this instance. I don't believe it."

I jumped at that. "Then you know it was murder and could even put your finger on the guilty man!"

"No, no, no," he said hastily. "Or rather, yes, as far as the possibility of murder goes. At least that is the way it looks on the surface. It would be the height of absurdity to contend that that peculiar back injury could be self-inflicted and you don't see how he could have come by it accidentally. Neither do I, to tell you the truth. For the rest—well—I was merely making a general statement. I mean to say that the reasons for putting an end to Goodhue's rotten escapades would justify an act that, under other circumstances, wouldn't be countenanced by decent people."

"You're sure, then, that this murder was committed by some 'decent' person?"

"You take me up too short, Mr. Clancy." The doctor frowned. "I think out loud as a man does when he's much alone, and when I have an intelligent listener I talk too much and not too intelligently, I'm afraid. Do have a drink! It will be cold going back."

"Is that a hint?" I managed to smile a little, though my thoughts were sufficiently grim.

Overton sighed. "No," he said shortly. "Stay as long as you like."

"And ask as many questions?"

"If you must." He sank into a chair and began poking the fire. Now and again he glanced at the bottle winking in the light of tiny flames but he made no move toward it, which struck me as odd and extremely interesting. "I'll volunteer something that must be routine in your business in this kind of a set up," he went on after a short silence. "You'll be subtly working up alibis—or otherwise, as the case may be—for everybody in sight I suppose, so I'll tell you at once that I haven't any witnesses to prove the truth of my statement that I came in off the ice about a half hour after I waved to you and Louise Enfield and was home from that time on for all the rest of the night."

"Did Nelson Russell come over to call on you early in the evening? He says he did."

"Nelson? No. I didn't see him. What time was that?"

"Between a quarter and half-past five," I mentioned casually.

The man's shaggy brows were knitted for a minute. "Oh," he said, "I guess I know, I must have been down in the boat house. I remember now. I fooled around the model I'm making for a while. It was real dark when I came up here. He probably did come along to get a drink. He often does that. But that's how I would have missed him."

"Sure. That explains it," I said easily.

He laughed, a short hard little bark. "And doesn't give any good alibi for him or for me, Clancy. But you can rule Nelson out

I know him well. He wouldn't have the nerve to shoot a hen pheasant sitting. And you couldn't, by the wildest stretch of the imagination, dig up a motive for him."

I looked straightly at him and our eyes met. "Well——" I prompted with what I hope was an ingenuous smile.

"You mean, what about me, Clancy? Do you think I look like a person who would risk his neck to stop a fellow human being from continuing to pollute and destroy innocent people?"

"I don't know, Doctor," I answered slowly. "I think, perhaps, you may be capable of great personal sacrifice."

He had reached out toward the bottle. It was almost within his grasp when he jerked his hand back and regarded me in silence for a full minute. At length he shifted heavily in his chair and said, "I believe you mean that, Clancy, but you're all wrong if you think there's anything altruistic about me. I'm a quitter. Maybe you don't know it, but Goodhue did. That's one of the reasons why I thank God he's dead. He dug up, in his clever, thorough way, all the details of my . . . fall, shall we say? Some of them were, well, I didn't enjoy having them brought up. Naturally I wanted to forget." He stopped and gazed bitterly into the fire.

"Tried to blackmail you, perhaps," I suggested.

His lower lip was thrust up and his brows made deep shaggy shadows across his sharp little eyes. "What makes you think that?" he asked harshly.

"He was the type," I replied. "And I know of one instance that was blackmail in effect though it might have evaded the law."

"Is it something you've heard in confidence, Clancy, or can you tell me about it?"

I suppose I was pleased by the inference that I would respect a confidential communication, but it didn't interfere with my efforts to probe deeper into the retired surgeon's character and intimate knowledge of the situation and also of the persons involved in it. I felt that an appearance of letting him in on the ground floor would do something to soften up his resistance and considered that I was justified in telling him of Goodhue's plan to devil Arnold about his wife's picture and at the same time to insure that a large sum of money would be forthcoming as a price for the same. Naturally I made no mention of Arnold's surreptitious effort to get the portrait-study immediately into his own possession, but I could see that Overton was considering the possibility of such an attempt being made, for, when I had finished the part I felt free to disclose, he remained silent for a few seconds before he asked: "How did Arnold take it?"

"He didn't like it," I rejoined without emphasis. "But what can he do but pay through the nose when the time comes? Meadows says he was ordered to and did express that one and other paintings to New York yesterday afternoon."

"Meadows!" The doctor's lip curled in disgust. "The fellow could be trusted to handle a lot of his master's dirty work! Why,

it was he all right," he broke off, "I'll tell you how Goodhue tried to work the same kind of a game on me. What I mean, it was an attempt at blackmail of a sort, but this wasn't a matter of money. No! And he didn't even take the trouble to present his case himself. He felt so sure that I'd sunk to anything that he sent Meadows over to offer me a hundred dollars to perform an illegal operation on a woman he was mixed up with—or to take the consequences of his broadcasting the intimate details of the reason for my—my position in the medical fraternity—to anyone who would listen."

"You refused," I said. I made it, not a question, but a definite statement. "That took what I should call a large percentage of intestinal fortitude."

"What was that Stevenson said?" he returned grimly. "Something about a point below which, please God, we will not stoop, no matter how low our standards seem to have fallen."

I looked around the quiet lonely room and at the slack heavy figure before the fire, at the bottles and glasses winking so knowingly among themselves, at the bent grey head, and while I felt the bitter taste of pity in my mouth, I knew that here was a man who had little left to lose, who could, perhaps, be goaded beyond endurance at last and, seeing in Constance Dangerfield another innocent victim, might be able to justify even murder to save her and to free himself from reiterated taunts and innuendoes. . . .

And yet, there was the method of the crime. Was this elderly dissipated frame capable still of strenuous dramatic action?

It was almost as if he read my thoughts, for he looked up suddenly and said: "If I've awakened suspicion against any particular person or persons, Clancy, by a careless word or look, by a suggestion that this was a case of justifiable homicide that many a decent person would consider good and profitable, you'll have to count me in on your list of suspects because that's my own opinion; it is now and has been for a long time. I'm not squeamish and if you think I'm too old and weak to have accomplished it successfully, you're very much mistaken. I have all the qualifications necessary; the intestinal fortitude (as you and one of our presidents so elegantly describe it) a clear and perfectly understandable motive, a good opportunity, besides ample strength to do just what was done down there on the lake on the other side of Goodhue's point last night."

CHAPTER XVIII

He had "all the necessary qualifications." The doctor's statement repeated itself over and over in my mind as I made my way back along the cleared road to Arnold Enfield's big luxurious summer home. "All the necessary qualifications." How could that be made to agree with another remark of his that I remembered quite as well. "If I had it to do I would have hit higher. The base of the brain."

Was that a shrewd attempt to throw dust in somebody's eyes? And, if so, why the effort just now to show me all the reasons for suspecting him as well as—perhaps more than—the other "decent people" who might have had adequate motive and opportunity.

Meadows. . . . Meadows must know all about the dreadful circumstances attending the doctor's downfall. Overton himself had made that plain enough. And I knew that Meadows had already approached Sergeant Keyes with angry hints. Did the doctor guess that that would be bound to happen? That Meadows, sooner or later, would bring to the notice of the authorities, as a motive for murder, Overton's resentment of Goodhue's knowledge of the facts and fear of further exposure? Had the doctor sensed this move on Meadows' part and taken the opportunity I had given him to forestall it?

That explanation was reasonable enough and there was no sense in being angry with myself because I was shrewd enough to see that it was quite possible. On the other hand . . . what made Overton insist that he was physically capable of killing the painter in spite of the evidence that made it seem impossible? Goodhue was a fast skater. He had been attacked from behind. That meant that he had been overtaken by someone approaching from the rear. . . . He could hardly have turned to defend himself, therefore the murderer must have been swift—and noiseless. . . .

I stopped short in my tracks. The lights from Enfield's windows shone less clearly than the sudden burst of illumination that dazzled my stupid brain. Of course! Why hadn't I seen it instantly, as Overton had, beyond the possibility of doubt. Perhaps because he knew already from guilty knowledge. . . . That was possible. Wasn't it even *probable?* . . . I saw now with horrible clarity that this was a crime where skill was essential. Not brawn but skill—and nerve.

And also I saw now in a flash that the scope of inquiry was both widened, and narrowed. No wonder the doctor was so quick to exclude Nelson Russell from any list of possible suspects. His wife, too. But the other women? Eugenia—and Louise Fontanelli? Yes. It could have been either. . . . I must reconstruct all my ideas. I saw that. And I knew that I would hate myself for what I had to do in the morning as well as being equally certain that I couldn't rest until I had done it.

"What in the world are you doing, Mr. Clancy? I thought they said you had gone for a walk." It was very bright that Sunday morning but Max Enfield didn't reflect any of the cheerfulness of the scene. "What possible object can you have in clearing the ice this way? Does my father know what you're up to?"

"One thing at a time, please," I expostulated. "I haven't seen your father yet, but I'm sure he won't mind Wiggar's borrowing a pair of shovels. And as to my reason for scraping the snow away

from the margin of this treacherous area, just put it down to scientific interest in the causes of a very unusual kind of an accident."

His young face was expressive of doubt and suspicion. He eyed me furtively but had little chance to say more, for my snow shovel joined Wiggar's in a duet of swift tempo and considerable volume. We had only just started clearing around the roped-off section from which Donald Goodhue's body had been recovered the day before. There was a light crust above a layer of soft rather dry snow and the work went forward quickly and without undue effort. The ice underneath was very smooth and for the most part unmarred by skate or other tracks until we reached an area close in-shore. Here skates had cut into the surface in some places, leaving tracks that followed the margin more or less closely. There seemed to be quite a good many of them and, so far as I could judge by the strokes, had been made by a skater or skaters travelling in either direction.

Max, hands in pockets, had followed curiously at a little distance. "Even Sherlock Holmes could hardly pretend to identify a skate track," he said, his expression lightening a little. "What's the idea, anyway ?"

"Merely a whim," I returned cheerfully. "What else could it be ?"

"I don't know," he countered. "You don't look as if you'd do anything without a purpose."

"Sounds like Alice in Wonderland. 'Don't go anywhere without a porpoise.' Remember ?"

He shrugged that off. "I guess I'd better get along back," he said. "Father'll want to go to church, I suppose. He makes a point of our all showing up in Fairfield when we're here, and I guess to-day won't be any exception."

I thought he looked uneasy. He lingered a few minutes longer but said nothing more and finally took himself off.

"Now we'll get back to our muttons, Wiggar," I said. "People will be coming and we won't have much time."

"I could get Meadows to help, sir, if you say so," was the low answer. "He's over there by the boat-house. Just came down. See him ?"

"Any reason why not ?" I asked with a quick look. "Do you think he's O.K. ?"

"He'll bear watching, I'm afraid, sir." Wiggar spoke regretfully.

"Then this might be a good chance to make observations. Suppose you chase over and see if he'll be willing to help. Keep on with the palsy-walsy stuff. You've done noble so far."

"Thank you, Mr. Peter." He was gone instantly and was back in a few minutes with Meadows and an extra shovel.

"May I ask the object of this, sir ?" the recruit inquired respectfully.

"Just put it down to insatiable curiosity, Meadows," I said. "I have a yen to prove a crazy theory I've conceived as to how the acci-

dental injury to Mr. Goodhue's back might have occurred and perhaps have been the indirect cause of his drowning."

"I don't see how that could be," the man muttered half to himself as he turned away to join Wiggar who was busily engaged in shovelling a path along the side of the roped-off space, heading in a general direction toward the north-west. Presently we rounded the west side of the roped-in area and began to circle it toward the north.

I had taken bearings on the place where the body was discovered Saturday morning and could locate it still with considerable accuracy. A line drawn from Max Enfield's cottage to the extreme tip of Goodhue's point and another from a huge pine south of the Rolf farm landing to the painter's boat-house would cross approximately where we were now working. I gave orders to spread out and widen the circle as we cleared it.

Wiggar, who was a little ahead and closest to the rope barrier, suddenly stopped the effective action of his shovel, peered down at the ice and summoned me with a quick lift of head and eye.

I didn't say anything but crossed in front of Meadows and joined him. There, in the ice, were two sharp parallel grooves about fifteen inches apart. They were thin and shallow and would have been scarcely discernible if they had not been filled with fine particles of snow.

"Skates," I murmured.

Wiggar nodded. "Coasting, as you might say, sir," he observed eagerly, "as you see, Mr. Peter. A long stroke will carry one ahead for some distance with the feet in a parallel position."

"Yes," I agreed softly. "The mark of the next stroke will be on the other side of the rope, if there was another stroke."

"Quite so, sir."

Meadows had ceased his labours and was regarding us with anxious eyes but he didn't ask any questions.

Wiggar said : "Shall I carry on inside the rope, sir ?"

"Not yet. It may be dangerous. Let's back-track him a bit. Careful now."

One long scrape of Wiggar's shovel.

"Stop !" I breathed. "No. Wait. This other way ! Follow it. So——"

We had come upon a very different groove. Wider. Deeper. Following the general direction of the parallel marks, one deep distinct continuous line passed under the snow covering inside the rope.

I drew a long breath. "We'll have to chance it," I said. "No. Not you, Wiggar. I'll take this on. You and Meadows rest a minute."

"Pardon me, sir. It isn't often that I disobey orders——"

"And this isn't one of the times." I grinned as I pushed Wiggar out of the way. "Stay where you are. I'll yell if I need help."

Meadows had caught his countryman by the arm. "Don't be a

fool," he muttered but loud enough to be heard. "No use to add to the risk he's running!"

I was moving rather quickly, pushing the broad snow shovel ahead with a frequent stroke to either side. On my right for a couple of yards those two fine parallel skate marks continued, then stopped altogether. Eagerly I drove the shovel this way and that through the snowy coating that had become softer and damper. The heavy groove persisted but there was no other sign. The ice was less clear, and suddenly I heard a low ominous slithering crash. Wiggar cried out. I leapt to safety just as the ice beneath me caved and began to sink.

"Far enough this way for the minute," I said, breathing hard. "We'll try something else now. Don't look at me that way, Wiggar. I'm all right. Didn't even get these galoshes really wet. The ice is firm enough along here outside the rope." I grasped my shovel and, harking back to the place where we had first discovered that long single track, began hastily to scrape across at right angles to its apparent course. "There should be. . . . Yes! This is it." I was as eager as a hound picking up a fresh scent. Here's another of these deep grooves well over to the left. . . . Not quite parallel to the first. . . . Why wouldn't it—— Oh, yes, I see. Now Meadows!"

"Yes, sir." He came closer, frowning, frightened, but obedient as a well-trained servant should be.

"Keep shovelling ahead along this line, see? Just keep on it. Needn't make a wide path. Now, Wiggar!"

"Yes sir." It was an echo in words but not in tone.

"See the direction Meadows is taking? Well, come along with me. We ought to pick up something just beyond here outside of the rope. We won't risk going in again until we find out—— Here. This ought to be about right. Now scrape away for all you're worth."

It was several minutes before we discovered anything more. Wiggar came first upon a sharp-cut line that appeared to be coming in a curve across the edge of the dangerous area from the general direction of the one we had lost when the ice refused to bear my weight. Meadows, being a safe distance off to the left, was coming on as rapidly as his bulk would permit. I could see the white groove he was uncovering and, measuring with my eye, I began to shovel again at a point close to the barrier and a little way off on Wiggar's right.

"There must be a third here somewhere," I muttered, scraping diligently. "There's got to be—— Ah!"

There it was! The beginning of a groove similar to the two others. Feverishly I began to push the snow carefully off to my right. As the three of us advanced it became evident that Meadows and I were describing a curve, keeping our places on the same radius, about fourteen feet apart, while Wiggar, though near, at first, to me,

gradually assumed a position equi-distant from us both. He maintained it for several yards and I was about to call a halt when the sound of distant voices made me look up and I was aware of several persons approaching from different directions.

Louise Enfield reached us first. She was on skis and had been moving very fast. "Max said——" She paused, panting a little. "Why!" she exclaimed, "whatever are you—— I don't understand!"

"These tracks?" I asked quickly. "Surely you must know what made them?"

"Of course. Ice-boat runners." She lifted her fine head and looked swiftly all about. "Why, Mr. Clancy, these must have been made by the *Arrow* when we sailed up here Friday afternoon. The ropes weren't up then of course. I didn't think we came quite this close to the springs. No wonder——" She stopped short and her hand went up over her mouth.

"Are you sure these are the tracks of the *Arrow?*" I asked looking straight down into her eyes.

Once more her glance fled from side to side of the lake and back and forth from her home to the promontory that shut out the view toward the north.

She bit her lip and her breath came in a little gasp when she answered slowly, "How can I tell? We came up here Friday. You must remember that, Mr. Clancy. But—— If there were any important reason, if anything depended on it," she hesitated and her mouth set, steady and hard—— "How could you expect anyone to be able absolutely to identify the tracks made by his own or another person's ice boat?"

CHAPTER XIX

"WHAT'S all this about, Clancy?" Arnold Enfield was also on skis but hadn't managed them as well as his wife and was a minute or so behind her.

I pointed to the tracks we had uncovered. He frowned, looked to right and left, then across the uneven, partly broken surface inside the ropes and around at the surrounding woods and hills.

"See anything significant here?" I asked in a tone so low that only the man and his wife could hear. I spoke hastily, for I had seen with some regret that the sheriff and his brother Jared were coming hurriedly across from the farm.

There was a blank pause. Arnold's eyes shifted again swiftly from one point to another, he moved a little nearer to Louise but did not look up at her. His frown deepened. He shook his head.

"I'm afraid I'm pretty practical. Lacking in imagination. Here are the marks of ice-boat runners, but if you cleared the whole lake you'd find them all over in every direction."

The two Rolf men were now very close. "What the hell goes on here?" the sheriff burst out. "You people keep away from this thin ice. Don't you know it's dangerous for a lot to gang up near the edge of——" He broke the sentence in two. "Whose idea was this, anyway, clearing off a path 'round the springs? Oh!" He pointed at me. "Was it you butting in, Mr. Clancy? Well, now! Sid Keyes seems to think you're quite a feller. I don't want to be unpolite, but if you want to pull off anything in this county, you'd ought to come to me fer permission. See what I mean?" His tone was truculent.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I didn't realize there was to be any further official inquiry into the cause of the late tragedy."

"What's that? Ur-r-umph." The sheriff cleared his throat. "That's right. We all know it was accidental drowning. It happens on this lake now and then. Bad. But it can't be helped if people will skate around in the dark. Us officials ain't got any jurisdiction over a private pond where nobody's allowed without permission. It's up to the owners to put up danger signs where needed."

"We do that. Don't we, Arnold?" Jared barked. "Can't nobody say we're careless. If a man hangs around or is fool enough to go skating after dark, it's his own look-out."

"That's right," Enfield agreed shortly. He turned to wave to a tall slender figure coming rapidly nearer, but heading farther toward the north. It was Tom Burton, and I guessed that he was on his way to get in Doctor Overton's weekly supply of wood. In response to Arnold's hail he veered and came over to where we stood.

At the same time the doctor himself appeared, and a minute later I caught a glimpse of another man approaching, swift and silent, from around the end of Goodhue's promontory. I didn't hear a sound as he drew near, but I was soon aware that Giles Landless had come up behind me and was standing, still as a statue, just off the edge of the augmented group.

There was practically no pause in the sheriff's blustering comments, which were less severe when he spoke to his brother. "O.K., Jared. I know you had some signs up here. I guess nobody's going to blame you fer anything, and that includes Mr. Enfield, too, I suppose. Nobody wants to make trouble for nobody else in these parts. We're all neighbours, Mr. Clancy, and we do our duty by one another, but we don't go in for fancy tricks and suspicions and such kinda Shylock stuff."

"You mean Sherlock—Sherlock Holmes methods." Tom Burton spoke for the first time, though I was sure he had already taken in all the salient features of his surroundings. "There isn't more trouble here, is there, Milton?"

"Naw," the sheriff drawled, "but seems to be heading that way maybe. Get further off, all you folks." He waved his arm in a peremptory gesture. "Get back away from the ropes. Can't you see there's a new break inside of 'em a'ready. And here comes more

people. Doggone it! If this keeps up Jared and you folks on this side of the lake will have to put up trespass signs all over the place and see they're obeyed. Hey, Max," he bawled. "Don't you and your wife come in too close now. That goes for you, too, Doctor Overton." The last was in a lower and more respectful tone.

"Anything the matter, Milton?" The physician didn't look at me but I saw his glance run hastily along and across the thin snow-filled lines drawn so sharply on the smooth dark ice.

"No, sir." The sheriff indicated me with a curving jerk of the thumb. "Seems Mr. Clancy got up early this morning with some kind of a bee in his bonnet. Want to tell us about it Mr. Shylock—er—Sherlock Holmes, whichever 'tis. I allers thought it was Shylock but I ain't got Tom's learning. Comes from travelling round with school-teachers and such, I guess."

He grinned knowingly. The blood came up under the young man's tanned face, the muscles tightened in his lean jaws but these were the only signs that the flaunting jeer did not pass unnoticed.

"Why don't you answer the sheriff?" The deep voice in my ear was low but very distinct. It must have been heard clearly by most of the group, for the unexpected presence of the hermit had been noted curiously by more than one.

I glanced quickly around at the half-circle of expectant faces. The keener ones looked to me as if the mind behind them had already grasped something if not all of the significance that might be attached to the record the snow had at first hidden and now made plainer than if it had never fallen.

"Yes," urged the sheriff with a sardonic patronizing grin. "Give us the benefit of city talent, do, Mr. Clancy! We're only hicks, you know. We prefer facts to fancy theories, but we got open minds and we like the stuff they pull in the movies. It's entertainin'. Let's hear!"

Under other conditions I might have laughed and backed myself out of the arena, but it came to me with a start that I probably had here before me most if not all of the possible actors in the drama that was becoming clearer and clearer in my mind. It was an opportunity that might never occur again. Wouldn't it be worthwhile to note reactions? To see who would and would not be convinced that my theory of the tragedy was correct; inescapable.

"Very good, sheriff." I managed a deferential smile. "Your knowledge of the techniques of ice boating may make you laugh my idea to scorn but——"

"Ice boating?" he interrupted with a sarcastic lift of surprised eyebrows. "I thought you had some stunt up your sleeve. But ice boats! What the hell——"

"Let him finish," Giles Landless broke in with an odd air of authority. He had moved in beside me. "Go on, sir, if you will."

"Well, if I must," I said, glancing aside at Arnold's half-averted face. "My idea is simply this. You see those two fine parallel

mark over there? They could hardly have been made by anything but a pair of skates. That's right, isn't it?"

Several heads bent in agreement. The sheriff said, "Looks like that might have been. Go on."

"From the position and the fact that they carry on in under the rope to the spot that was too weak to bear my weight——"

"Now, look here, Clancy," Sheriff Rolf barked, "you been going too far. I put up that rope to keep derned fools from risking their half-wit lives. You acted agin my express orders——"

"All right. I apologize," I cut in. "But I think you must see, since Donald Goodhue's body was found very near to if not exactly at that spot, that everything points to the probability that those marks were made by his skates when he went on and through the ice."

"Well, yes," the sheriff admitted grudgingly. "Might be so. You can't prove they was. However, what's that got to do with what you said before?"

"About ice boats? Just look over here." I led the way and the others followed, peering each over the other's shoulder. "These three wider tracks here were made by the rudder runner and the two outboard side runners of an ice boat, weren't they?"

"Yes, but——"

"I know, sheriff," I went on hastily. "There are plenty of ice-boat tracks all over the lake. But I ask you. Look at the relation of these to the skater's tracks. Notice that, where the two groups are parallel the ice boat has left the marks of but *two* of the runners, and tell me how that could be!"

Someone behind me gasped. I wasn't quick enough to see who. But on more than one face there appeared a consciousness of the inevitable deduction.

"Wasn't it because she hiked there, as you call it?" I insisted. "See. The wind was out of the north Friday afternoon late. The boat that made these marks came along from somewhere down toward the lower end of the lake. When she got near this point, she turned sharp across the wind. The sail filled, she heeled over hard and that brought the opposite end of the runner on an acute angle up from the ice."

There was an instant of silence so intense that the faint echo of settling ice sounded loud and ominous. It might have been that that caused a sudden backward movement by those about me. The hermit alone remained close by my side. "What then?" he asked with an odd effect of urgency. "Was there indication on the body that it had been struck?"

"There was," I said, "a heavy bruise, slanting from left to right across the hips just below the waist. Doctor Overton will tell you so."

All eyes turned to the grey face of the surgeon. He nodded, but did not speak.

"You know about that bruise, sheriff," I said. "Keyes would

have described it to you. How else could it have happened? Don't you see? The boat came up behind Goodhue. The ice was smooth and clear then, hardly coated with the flakes that had only just begun to fall. There would have been little noise. None at all for a skater whose cap was pulled down over his ears.

"Then just at the inevitable instant, the skipper changed his course, his boat heeled over, the hiking runner still at full speed struck his victim a terrific blow, carrying the broken body forward until its weight broke through the thin ice and sank, paralysed and helpless, to drown in the icy depths below."

"Oh, my God," Max groaned, white to the lips. "Horrible! I can't believe it." His arm supported his young wife who had covered her face with her hands.

"No, nor could anybody else," Jared Rolf said harshly. "Whoever knows anything at all about ice boating would realize how smart a feller would have to be. Not one in a million could pull a trick like that. Like you said, Milt," he turned toward his brother, "it would do for the movies, that kinda stuff, but not for folks that know what's what."

I thought for a minute that I had made some impression on the sheriff, for he turned to Arnold and asked, "What d'you think of this idea, Mr. Enfield? Is he crazy or not?"

"Clancy? Oh, he isn't crazy," my host's reply left something to be desired, I thought, from my point of view. It seemed to imply that I wasn't *exactly* crazy.

Sheriff Rolf rubbed his nose which was red with the cold. "Well," he said slowly, "I dunno. . . . I guess I got to think this over. It's a cute idea, as far's it goes. I can see that. But, as Jared says, it would take some all-fired smart steering; besides, who'd do a dirty trick like that, even to a feller like Goodhue?"

"Another thing Mr. Clancy don't seem to take account on," Jared argued, "is this here. How can any golderned detective say when these here tracks was made? Might a been a week ago. We ain't had a reel good thaw since before last Sunday. Runners anyway score deep enough, so the tracks wouldn't change much in a couple a days or so. We've all been out on the lake, back and forth, up and down. Max has, and his wife. Tom and me, different times. Mrs. Enfield and Arnold and people visiting 'em. And Doctor Overton. Any of us could a made them tracks most any day last week."

"That sure is right," Milton Rolf agreed, slapping his brother's shoulder heartily. "You got a head like a tack, Jared. I allers said so. No, Mr. Clancy," he shook his own with an air of heavy banter. "You ain't dug up enough evidence to put in Aunt Sairey's thimble. Too bad you took all that trouble. Gosh! Here comes a lot of kids over the hill. You got to keep 'em off, Jared, or else they'll come across and get into trouble. Hey! You!"

The two brothers rushed heavily away, waving peremptory

warnings. The little group about me melted. Tom Burton and the doctor, moving quickly, disappeared in a short time beyond Goodhue's point. I dismissed Wiggar with an admonitory word and he went off with Meadows. Max and his wife had already turned toward home.

"Shall we go, Clancy?" Arnold asked in a sombre voice.

"Yes," I answered. "But I can't keep up with you. I'll be right along."

I watched the husband and wife as they went, with long strokes, away over the snow. . . . And I wondered if it was only the fact that they were ski-ing that make their paths seem so far apart.

CHAPTER XX

ARNOLD was in the library. I followed him and closed the door.

"We've got to talk," I said. "I'm not just clear as to what I'd better do."

"You mean you aren't convinced of the truth of the proposition you outlined just now out there on the lake?" He tried to speak hopefully but it wasn't at all convincing.

"Oh, no." I shook my head. "I'm certain enough about that. There's no other conceivable way that Goodhue could have been hurt as he was. You ask Doctor Overton. I'm sure he saw it at once."

Still Enfield shook his head. "It's too fantastic, Clancy," he said. "There must be some other explanation of that injury to Goodhue's back. Maybe he fell earlier and was so badly hurt that he got mixed up, skirting around the springs, and blundered into the dangerous part."

"You can ask Doctor Overton about that," I said. "He might not be willing to testify without having made a further examination of the body but he was convinced, practically at first sight, that the spine was so seriously injured as to render the victim helpless, though death wasn't instantaneous."

"Then, he did, actually, drown." Arnold spoke slowly and with evident reluctance to mention a name that was hateful to him.

"Yes. But it was murder, just the same."

"You can't prove that, Clancy." His eyes had become hard and shrewd. In spite of his ordinarily urbane exterior, I saw here indication of the power that had made him a successful banker and astute politician. He went on eagerly: "You can't prove any of it. So why try? The police are satisfied that it was an accident. And listen to me! Even if your theory were correct, it might still have been an accident. Don't you see that?"

"No," I answered firmly. "I don't."

"But think," he urged. "It's dusk, we'll say. Even pretty dark. Someone is out in an ice boat, playing around, not knowing there's a skater anywhere about. Maybe he isn't so skilful, the skipper, I

mean. Perhaps he sees too late that he's close to the danger sign. If his sail was out at one side he might not have known there was anyone ahead of him until he came about and his runner might have struck before he could do anything about it."

"I've thought that possibility over," I agreed sombrely, "but if it was merely a hit-and-run affair, what kind of a moral excuse is that for your skipper? Wouldn't any decent innocent person have raised the alarm? Tried to rescue the victim of the accident?"

"You don't know that he didn't try, Clancy."

"That's true. Though it seems unlikely that an attempt could have been made without any calls for help; a disturbance that someone would have been bound to hear. It looks as if Russell was out of doors a good deal of the time in question—and so were you, you remember. He heard nothing—and you didn't either, I suppose, or you must have mentioned it before this." I said all this in a non-committal way, quite devoid of offence and Enfield appeared to accept it in the same spirit.

"I heard nothing," he said. "And saw no one, either going or coming on the lake that night."

"There wasn't any ice boat out?"

"Not any in sight when I went up to the point. Coming back I don't believe I could have distinguished one unless it had been very close."

"If it was deliberate murder," I said, "it must have happened before it got too dark to see fairly well."

"That's true enough," he returned excitedly. "And what a risk that would have been for a man to run. He might have been seen. Besides, think of the skill it would have taken."

"Yes," I said. "That would seem to limit the suspects. If, on the other hand, it was a case of hit-and-run, in other words a culpable accident, it might have been anyone who had access to an ice boat. So far as I know this is the list. Perhaps you can add to it."

I took a note-book out of my pocket. "For those who live on the other side of the lake I have down Jared Rolf and possibly Tom Burton. He can sail his stepfather's boat, I believe."

"Oh, yes," Arnold agreed, "but Tom—— Oh, well, if you want to put down everybody who could take out Jared's boat, there's Mary, though she's not as good at it as she is about other things. Tom has been teaching Connie Dangerfield, but I've never seen her out alone. And of course they're all absurd in this connection."

"Are you sure of that?"

He looked up quickly. "Why—why, yes."

"You don't think any of them could hate Goodhue enough? For any reason? His high-hat manners? His pursuit of the young teacher?"

Enfield shook his head, but slowly, as if he would be a little glad to entertain such a theory. "It doesn't seem possible," he said at last.

"All right then. What more reasonable suspicion could there be for the persons on this side of the lake? What about Doctor Overton?"

He stared at the fire and didn't answer at once. "I can't think it of him," he murmured after a short silence. "Even though——" He raised his head. "Don't let's speak of him yet, Clancy. Go on with your list."

"All right," I said, referring again to my notes. "On this side of the lake I have down Max and his wife and your own wife. Those I know about. Are there any others? What do you think of the Russells? Can either of them sail a boat?"

"Nelson has a small yacht he keeps in Portland harbour. I'm pretty sure he doesn't know anything about ice boating, and Ada knows less about most things." Arnold stirred in his chair and lifted his eyes to mine with an expression of candour that seemed genuine enough. "I'm not an expert," he said, "but I can manage fairly well. I know the ropes and all the principles of ice-boating and if the wind isn't too strong, I'm rather good."

"But not as clever as the two Mrs. Enfields?" I suggested lightly. "I saw your wife do a great stunt when she took me out Friday afternoon. As a matter of fact it looked to me as if we were going to get into trouble up there in the curve below Goodhue's point. But she got us out of the danger zone without turning a hair."

My host looked hard at me and then down at the fire. His voice was grim and dangerous. "You're not suggesting Louise in this connection, by any chance, are you, Clancy?"

"I think, as far as the mechanics are concerned, that she has sufficient skill to do what I'm certain was done in Goodhue's case," I answered coolly.

His face grew dark with congested blood. He half-rose threateningly and sank back into his chair again. There followed minutes in which the only sound was the man's panting breath. He had gained some degree of composure before he allowed himself to speak.

"You couldn't prove that, Clancy," he said, "not even that she has sufficient skill, though that she may have. I don't know. She's a marvel to me in every way. But this I do know!" His tone increased in intensity though not in volume. "Louise is incapable of a wicked or vindictive act. I'm not. I confess to you now that I'm still not sure I would have gone to Goodhue's rescue Friday night if I had heard him calling when he went through that dangerous place in the ice. Do you remember suggesting that I might have been coming from his studio when he fell in? I've thought of it often since. At that time, not having found the picture, I was furious to the point of—I don't know what! If I had met him man to man, if I had caught him somehow at a disadvantage, even if I had found him drowning. . . . I'd like to think I would have risked my life to save him, but I can't fool myself. I've got too much

common sense. I'm not the stuff heroes are made of, and I can only be thankful I wasn't put to the test."

He was so earnest and he seemed so sincere that I was loath to go on with what I meant to determine. "Enfield," I said, "I'm going to be frank with you. If other than friendly inquiries were to be made, from your own showing you must see that any attempt to bring up the matter of an alibi in your case would be worse than useless. For Mrs. Enfield, so far as I can find out, the position isn't very much better. Apparently no one saw her after she came off the lake at a little after four. She says she was in her room until she came down, dressed for dinner, about six-thirty. That proves and disproves nothing, of course."

"Of course it doesn't, and doesn't need to," he broke in harshly. "I'm surprised that you thought it necessary to figure out anything about her, in any case."

"Wait a minute," I interrupted in turn. "Can you say honestly that you can't imagine any reason why Louise Fontanelli, now Mrs. Arnold Enfield, would be very glad of Donald Goodhue's sudden passing out of the picture ?"

"You mean that he was blackmailing her." His voice dropped low and he leaned forward, making his plea with an intense earnestness that was almost like a physical force. "Yes. That I believe may have been. And I admit, in that case, she may feel much the same relief that I do in knowing it can't go on any longer. But no matter what indiscretion she might have been sensitive about, and what small deceit she might have been capable of practising to spare my feelings, she would have come to me; she would have appealed to me for help, rather than commit a wild and desperate deed. I *know* it. I'm as certain as that I'm alive. *I* might be tempted. She couldn't be. Not that way. Never ! Never ! You must believe me."

In his emotion his heavy signet ring cut into my wrist as he grasped it. He went on swiftly : "Listen to me, Clancy. Listen—and think ! What good would you accomplish by raising further questions ? And how much harm might come to innocent persons ! If you could prove your contention that it was murder; if you could prove to the state authorities that you were right as to the method, then the fact would be brought out that there are only three ice boats on the lake—not counting the dead man's, of course. Of those three, Overton's, Jared's and ours, there are a limited number of persons who could sail them. If the whole devilish business were brought into the open, each one of those people would be questioned. On account of Goodhue's reputation as an artist and his spectacular social record the newspapers would find all our friends suspect and fair game, and the public would eat the sensation alive. Max would be grilled because everybody around knows he's jealous as hell, and the boy couldn't stand up to it well. Of course he wouldn't hurt a fly, in spite of the half-

baked way he talks sometimes. It would be dreadful for him and Eugenia.

"As for Louise," his voice softened, "innocent as she is of really harming any one, it would be a desperately painful experience, especially when, or if, that picture with its damned inscription comes into public notice before I can get hold of it and destroy it. . . . Or if the papers should get wind of anything that might rouse suspicion about the loss and recovery of her jewels.

"You see, Clancy! You must see that, innocent as we are, all of us, it would go far toward wrecking our lives. And for what? Do you think it would add to your reputation? Could you even prove your theory that Goodhue was murdered in the way you described this morning? Wouldn't it sound bizarre and impossible to people who knew nothing of the precision with which an ice boat can be steered? And how many know that, do you suppose?

"Then, if you got by with that much successfully, how prove that Goodhue wasn't struck by accident? That's still a tenable theory, seems to me. It would be manslaughter in that case, certainly, but by whom? How could anyone say for sure that those tracks you uncovered were made at any definite time or by any particular boat?

"And when you got that far, what record was left to show who the skipper was? None! None, certainly. Oh, Clancy, don't you realize what you're up against? These local officials don't want trouble. They won't back you up and you couldn't even get started without the proper contacts. I beg of you, for your own sake as well as ours, let the matter drop. Goodhue is dead. Nothing you can say or do will alter that. He was a menace while he lived. Don't let him use you to carry on for him beyond the grave! He may have been murdered as you say, but as far as I'm concerned, instead of prosecuting, I almost believe we'd be justified in offering a vote of thanks——"

"That's what Doctor Overton said," I commented soberly. "Yes, Mr. Enfield, that's exactly what Overton said."

He stopped short and his jaw dropped. He said nothing more for a full minute, then he spoke conclusively: "Even so, I agree with him—as you must agree with me, Clancy. You have no possible case. No man of sense and experience would go on with it. You *must* let the matter drop."

CHAPTER XXI

WELL, I thought to myself, I may not be a man of sense, but my experience urges me not to let the matter drop until I've exhausted every angle of inquiry. If, when that is done, I'm certain in my own mind that I can't dig up materials for a watertight case, then and not until then can I get the teasing questions out of my mind: Was there any other way to explain the evidence we had uncovered in

connection with Donald Goodhue's death? If not, was it murder or manslaughter? And who, of that small number of possible suspects was guilty?

In thinking it over, quietly by myself, I came to the conclusion that practically the main question of the depth of guilt depended on the time. How late or how early did Goodhue reach that danger zone? And what was the visibility at that tragic hour?

Who would know that? Aside from the man or woman responsible for his death, Constance Dangerfield appeared to be the last person who had seen him alive. . . . During the dreadful night search, before Jared took the women home, I had come in contact with them several times, but very briefly. Even so, it seemed to me there was something odd and enigmatic in the way they were taking Goodhue's disappearance. I didn't think so much of it at the time. Now, in view of later discoveries, it began to assume a look of importance, and I suddenly decided to do a little investigating on that side of the lake.

Earlier, to my surprise, I found that Arnold still meant to adhere to his regular custom of taking all his family to the Community Church in Fairfield. I sensed that it was an attempt to prove "business as usual" and thought it not a bad idea, though I had declined his invitation on the grounds of having writing that must be done. The Russells went along and the house seemed strange and deserted when I quietly left it.

I borrowed a fur coat and galoshes and made my way unobserved (as far as I knew) down to the lake. The brightness of the early morning was gone. There was little wind; the sky was grey and the dark hemlocks having shaken off much of the snow, looked as if hung with widow's weeds. The crust above the ice was just firm enough to make walking easy. Evidently the sheriff and his helpers had succeeded in getting the word around that none of the boys and girls or their elders of the country-side were to be allowed on Lake Kearsarge, or else everybody had gone to church, which is still a "must," I remembered, for a New England Sunday morning.

Only two figures remained, silhouetted against the whiteness of the lake, Wiggar and Meadows. As soon as the sheriff was safely off the scene, the two, acting under my brief word in Wiggar's receptive ear, had begun, with their shovels, to continue the uncovering of the trail we had found at the edge of the springs. They had made good progress in different directions. I met Wiggar first.

"You may wish to examine the skate tracks as far as I've been able to follow them, sir," he suggested with restrained eagerness. "They aren't too clear, but I believe we can trace them from those parallel ones under the rope here. See—there—and there—and so on."

"Hm-m-m," I murmured. "The direction seems to be consistent with the idea that he came from the general direction of the farm landing. Must have veered a little to the east, but that might have

been because of the condition of the ice or to get more into the lee of his own promontory. He had to aim a little toward the north of his boat-house to get around the springs. He was evidently about to describe a curve around the upper edge when he was struck. That seems perfectly plain. Evidently he didn't come up along the eastern shore. Which means he probably didn't go on to the Enfield's, but came across in a fairly straight line when he left Miss Dangerfield."

"Quite so, sir. Now would you care to go back? Or would you prefer to cross over a bit this way where you can pick up the three lines of the ice-boat runners? They're quite easy to follow."

"Right," I said, verifying the course with my eyes. "Hm-m-m. We seem to get a change of direction here. What do you think that indicates?"

"Well, sir," Wiggar answered modestly. "Subject to correction it would seem as if it was necessary to tack here, which would indicate, perhaps, that the craft was coming up against the wind which was then from the north as we already have ascertained."

"Accurate and well put," I commended, "and bears out my own diagnosis. So far this boat might have come from either shore."

"Yes, Mr. Peter, and I wonder if we can learn a great deal more by continuing farther. Here I think you will see there are indications of a number of tracks, crossing as well as going more or less in the same direction. I'm very glad you came just at this point, for I confess that I'm rather at a loss which ones to follow. It's very confusing."

"It certainly is." I frowned uncertainly. "You managed to get hold of a tape measure? Good. Now let's try."

Wiggar held one end while I took the other. "Three, six, nine, twelve, and two." The tape was only a yard long and it was difficult to be accurate but it seemed as if the distance between the out-rigged runners on the boat in which we were vitally interested must be very close to fourteen feet. . . .

But so were some of the other tracks as nearly as we could determine. Apparently many, if not all, of the ice boats on the lake were the same gauge, so to say. When a few minutes later, we went across to Meadows, we found him in the same difficulty. Here the tracks were many and I concluded we had reached the course laid out for Thursday's race. There was no use going farther.

I thanked Meadows and let him go. He seemed nothing loath. We watched the heavy figure until he was out of earshot.

"Not a spiritual type," I commented glancing aside at my faithful follower and friend.

"A disappointment, sir." Wiggar sighed. "Some good points, and some bad ones, I'm afraid. I had hoped for better things."

"Have you found out whether he expects to gain anything by his master's death?"

"He seems to have been devoted to Mr. Goodhue's interests,

both good and bad, and I think he made sure of reaping the reward for each service as he went along."

"In which case he would prefer a live furnisher of opportunities to a problematic inheritance ?"

"I think so, Mr. Peter. However, I discovered that first day during the ice-boat race that he quite fancies himself as a skipper. Perhaps I should have mentioned it at the time."

"No occasion then—but now ?" I considered the point. "He could have taken out Goodhue's boat, of course. . . . If he had come back from the express office in time. We can verify that if it's necessary. . . . Doesn't seem too feasible. . . . However, this whole thing is a puzzle without an answer unless we can get a definite line on when the tragedy actually did occur."

"And then, Mr. Peter ?"

"If it happened after dark it might not be so heinous a crime, though it stands to reason that it would have been impossible for the boom or the runner plank of an ice boat to strike any object without registering the fact to the skipper in no uncertain terms. . . . And there's another thing, Wiggar. Come back with me to the place where we found that the person sailing the boat must have tacked coming up. . . . Now, here we are. Let's continue along. . . . And watch where he began to alter his course. . . . See. Here it is. This is where he jibed, his sail swung over . . . and he began to hike. . . ."

"Yes, Mr. Peter. It's quite plain." The quiet voice vibrated with sudden conviction.

"Now, look at the skate tracks ahead there. It's at least twenty yards before the strokes stop and the skates begin to slide. You see what that means ?"

"You state it, Mr. Peter," Wiggar urged, though there was the light of comprehension in his pale eyes.

"Well it certainly indicates that the sail had swung over to port at least an appreciable instant before Goodhue was struck. Therefore it was the starboard runner that caught him and drove him forward until he crashed through. The sail couldn't have been in the way, and the person sailing the boat must have known, even if the visibility was very poor, that he had sent a human being to his death unless he could stage a rescue. That would have been difficult if not impossible for one person to accomplish, but he could have dropped his sail and using the light body of the boat for a raft could have made the attempt without much danger to himself. It seems very probable that Goodhue's body would have come to the surface and it wouldn't have been much of a stunt to hold the head out of water until help could arrive. There were people about and the painter's own place is near enough here, so that it seems impossible that any loud cries of distress wouldn't have been heard by someone."

Wiggar bent his neat head in complete acquiescence, and then

ventured a question. "You feel quite sure, sir, that the individual involved was a man ?"

"No," I answered uncomfortably. "I don't think we're justified in taking that as proven."

"Wouldn't it alter the—culpability—as one might say—to some extent, sir ?"

"Perhaps. . . . If a woman were to meet with an accident of that sort she might not be as able to make the initial effort of rescue as well as a man; her voice might not be as strong. . . . But a woman's scream would be apt to carry farther and a call for help would surely be instinctive no matter how frightened she might be."

"But if she called and no one heard ?"

"Then, Wiggar, I think she might be very frightened indeed . . . and even though innocent in intention, she might think about it a long time before deciding whether to confess or not."

"You were going over to the Rolf farm, Mr. Peter ?" Wiggar's face was enigmatic.

"Yes. To determine, if I can, whether it's at all probable that Goodhue lingered somewhere and didn't get to this side of the lake until after dark . . . and, Wiggar——"

"Yes, Mr. Peter."

"Let me have that tape measure and you sleuth around and see if you can find a yardstick or a steel tape. I'd like an accurate measurement of the distance between these runner tracks, and a comparison with the runners of all three of the boats on this shore."

"The three, sir ?"

"Yes. Doctor Overton's, the Enfields' *Arrow* and the dead man's *Flash*."

"Quite so, sir." Wiggar handed over the tape. "And you will take care of the *Clipper?*"

"As near as I can with this. It won't be too far off to get an idea at least. If there's any point in it we can check again later. The boats all looked about the same size and it may determine nothing. We'll see. Oh, and another thing, Wiggar."

"Yes, Mr. Peter ?"

"Think you could get some photographs around here from different points and make a little map to show the course of this boat where it tacked over there and where it swerved to come across the wind ?"

"Thank you, yes, Mr. Peter. I brought along the movie camera and the other, just in case——" His tone was hopeful and the celerity with which he departed on these arduous but congenial errands could only be equalled by his air of calm and complete detachment.

CHAPTER XXII

IT wasn't easy measuring the Rolf boat, though the *Clipper* was a stern steerer and the runner plank, in consequence, fairly near the bow, in which it differed from the bow-steering type, where the runner plank is set well astern under the fuselage which is rather narrow. The latter was true of all the other boats and I hoped Wiggar would be able to make his report with a greater degree of accuracy. However, I managed pretty well. Fourteen feet, as near as I could get to it, was the distance between the runners which were standing on boards laid down near the edge of the ice. I took a couple of whacks at it, first measuring along the plank as well as I could reach and then along the uneven surface beneath, from runner to runner. It took several minutes and, though I was pretty well engrossed in what I was doing, I had an eerie sense that I was being watched. Glancing up covertly I thought I caught a slight movement in a tangled thicket of evergreens a little way back from the shore on my left. It might have been caused by a lump of snow, falling by its own weight, I told myself. At any rate, when I finished and went over to look, there was nothing there except a lot of footprints, very confused, and leading through a heavy growth of hemlock, balsam and white birch to the steep path that zig-zagged up to the farmhouse.

I found Mary Rolf alone in the kitchen. The enticing smell of roasting chicken, and little white onions boiling in a pot, filled the room. Her sleeves were rolled up and she was cutting biscuits from a broad sheet of dough on a floury pastry board. A huge apple pie had just come out of the oven and was standing at the back of the big range.

I didn't think she was too glad to see me, nor that the trumped up excuse of the Enfield cook needing more cream went over very well. However, her instinct of hospitality was in excellent working order. She bustled off, returning with a glass of milk and a plate of cookies and set them down before me.

"They don't have Sunday dinner before two at Enfields," she said, "and I hear you was out early this morning, Mr. Clancy. A bite and a sup will do you no harm. Now, if you'll excuse me——"

She returned to her biscuits, lifting them neatly on a broad knife and placing them in soldierly ranks on an edgeless sheet of tin. I expressed deep and flattering appreciation of the fare she had set before me. She responded but without the volubility I had come to associate with her, much to my disappointment. At last she came over to the table and placing her floury knuckles on the comfortable bulges at the sides of her clean butcher's apron, she said, in a low voice:

"You didn't come here for cream, Mr. Clancy. We took a quart over with the milk yesterday evening. I drive the car over there every night myself, so I know. They couldn't possibly want more to-day. So what did you come for ? I think you'd better tell me."

"I think so, too," I agreed, smiling up at her red earnest face. "Frankly, I wanted a short conversation with Miss Constance. Is she here?"

"What do you want to talk to her about? Hasn't the poor girl had trouble enough?"

"How do you mean 'trouble enough'?" I took her up quickly.

"Oh!" she hesitated. "This whole thing. Such an awful accident! And Friday night, out there on the ice, looking, looking, and not knowing if——" She stopped abruptly.

"If what?" I prompted urgently.

She glanced out of the window and said hurriedly, leaning over the table that stood between us, "Do you think he drowned himself on purpose, Mr. Clancy?"

"What?" I exclaimed, startled.

"I believe that's what Connie thinks."

"Oh? Did she tell you so?" I looked up into shrewd intelligent eyes that failed to meet mine.

"Not in so many words," she answered, "but I could tell, all right."

"But why?" I insisted. "Why should a successful painter, at the height of his fame and powers, want to kill himself? What reason could there be?"

She glanced at me then through narrowed lids. "Not any, if you ask me." Contemptuously. "A man like that there Goodhue don't have attacks of conscience or hate himself so bad for anything he done no matter how it was took. And that kind don't take no for an answer, far's a pretty girl's concerned. Even if she cuts up rough, he'd just wait for her to quiet down and come at her again on another tack. Men!" Her face was hard and bitter. "They don't discourage so easy, if they're that kind."

"Then there was a scene between them," I said with quiet conviction.

Her lips came together in a straight line. "I talk too much," she said angrily.

"No. This may be very important, Mrs. Rolf. I'm not asking just out of curiosity. I want to determine what my duty is toward this community. I don't want to exceed it, nor to sidestep a responsibility. You see, I've had very special training. I'm a private detective by profession. Your brother-in-law, the sheriff, knows that already and so do some others here. I happen to be practically on the spot when a tragedy occurs. It looks to me like murder, though it may be only manslaughter. I believe that it actually must have been one or the other.

"Now, I ask you," I continued on a note of confidence which was not wholly insincere, "what ought I to do? If the ice boat that struck Goodhue and drove him into the water was manned by someone who saw him too late to change its course, then there is a possible chance that some effort was made to rescue the victim of a pure

accident, and, that failing, the person responsible might have been too upset and frightened to report it. Do you see what I mean ?"

"He was hit by an ice boat ?" She breathed audibly. "Goodhue was hit ? And—and then drowned ?"

"Yes," I said.

"Who says so ?"

"I do," I answered firmly, "and I'm quite sure I could prove it if it became necessary."

"But if it was an accident ?" She looked out from under lowering brows.

"If I can convince myself of that, I will do nothing further, Mrs. Rolf, I promise you," I returned with all the gravity I felt. "On the other hand, if it was done with malice—if it was *murder*, then the perpetrator is probably capable of more crimes and should be brought to justice."

"Justice," she repeated in a hard whisper. "Justice, yes. But what is justice, Mr. Clancy ? Ain't it something different to every person ?" She took a long breath and burst out fiercely, though she kept her voice down, "That man was prowling after my dear little Connie like a tiger, and she that young and innocent ! We done our best to take care of her, Tom and I did. If Goodhue was likely to keep her after dark I always let him know and he went for her, just casual, you know, like he happened along. We always managed that O.K. But we couldn't always pull it off in the daytime, which seemed safe enough. And yet, if you'll believe me, it was in broad daylight, or at least it wasn't nearly dark——" She stopped again with a comprehensive gesture of fury and an outraged glance of smouldering dark eyes.

"At the studio ?" I suggested earnestly but quietly.

"No. At least the poor kid thought his flattery was just lovely manners, even up to the very last, when he insisted on coming over with her. It was down there by the bath-house on the landing. She didn't tell me what he actually done, but it was plenty to open her eyes, and when she came up she was crying and sobbing as if her heart would break. Told him she'd never see him again, never ! And wished to God she never had. I had to put her to bed before the men came in for dinner. They was late, Friday night, because Jared went in to Fairfield that afternoon and Tom was working on his new house till it was too dark to see any more."

"But it wasn't late when Miss Constance came up from the lake, was it ?"

"No," she snapped, "it was not. Like I told you it was still daylight. You don't think she could have had anything to do with—with—— No ! You couldn't possibly be fool enough to think that. She's only just begun to be able to manage an ice boat alone and she come right home after she told that wolf what she thought of him and his propositions. I know she did."

"I believe you said that was around half-past five, Mrs. Rolf."

"Might have been a little mite later but not enough to count. She come in and dropped on that chair by the door, poor young thing! I never was so sorry for any innocent creetur before in my life. She's been thinking he was a prince, or one of those knights that used to set at the round table in old King Arthur's time, and that we was just dumb country folks that didn't know what was what."

"You all tried to warn her, you and your husband and Tom?"

"Well, yes. Jared shot off his face a lot too much and his kind of talk don't do no good. Maybe mine didn't either. I guess it didn't. Tom didn't do so much talking but he kept quietly on the job, my boy did. She owes a lot to him."

I don't think it had even crossed her mind at that minute that Constance might owe too much to Tom Burton, or that it had occurred to her as a possibility that anyone could imagine her son capable of a furious drastic action that would for ever rid the girl, whom they all loved in their various ways, of this menace to her peace. I came to believe afterward that she already had some other quite definite suspicion that obscured the possibility of any culpability on the part of her beloved son or any danger to him in the facts that she so innocently brought to my notice.

I, of course, gave no indication that I had made a mental note of this and all the other points brought out in our conversation. Looking out of the window I saw Jared coming from the barn and knew I had little time for more of the same.

"Mrs. Rolf," I said hurriedly, "is there any reason to think Goodhue might have made another attempt to put himself right with Constance before he started back across the lake? He didn't come up to the house, by any chance?"

Her face was a picture of disgust. "Skunks don't come and knock on the front door expecting to see 'Welcome' on the mat." She sniffed. "That girl Connie can speak her mind and she sent that one off with a flea in his ear. You can take it from me."

"Then you feel sure he started straight back, while it was still light?" I urged.

"While it was still light," she answered just as her husband flung open the door.

"What's that, Mary? Hey?" He glanced over at me. "Oh, you here, Mr. Clancy? What d'jou come fer? Anything new going on?" He certainly was a dour cuss but he was doing as well in the way of joviality as his nature would allow. "We got chicken fer dinner. Don't you want to stay? I'm a good pervider and it only means putting on another plate."

I thanked him but declined just as Constance came very quietly into the kitchen. She nodded to me with an attempt at a smile, took out a clean white cloth from a drawer, and prepared to set the long table at which I had been sitting. I rose and made my excuses. Tom appeared from the back region about that time and I had a

chance to ask all three of them if they could think of anything that might have delayed Goodhue's return toward his house on Friday night.

Constance still thought he might have called at Max's cottage or at the elder Enfield's, even though, as I pointed out, no one had seen him at either place. She said it was quite a common thing for the cottagers to run in and out of each other's houses at all hours and to wait around awhile perhaps if no one was about. They often did that at the studios, Max's as well as— as the other one. Tom and Jared and even Mary appeared to think this might have happened.

"Something must-a kep' him," Jared said. "He'd never a-blundered into that hole if it hadn't been dark."

"Neither of you saw him after he left Miss Constance, of course," I suggested.

Jared shook his head. "I was to Fairfield. Didn't get home till pitch dark. Late to supper and most didn't get none, Mary was that upsot about something or other." His frowning, knowing glance flashed from Constance to me and he shook his head again with sly meaning. Evidently he had found out the cause of his wife's "upsotness" and I had a horrid feeling that he got a kind of ugly satisfaction out of the situation. Hadn't he been wise to Goodhue's intentions from the start and hadn't he warned the girl?

I turned to Tom who had been stoking the fire and had made no response to my veiled inquiry. "How about you, Burton?" I said. "You didn't happen to be in a place where you got a view of the lake around dusk Friday evening?"

Mary was taking a pot off the stove. She put it back so quickly that the water splashed and sizzled. Her black eyes flashed as she turned to me. "I told you a'ready, Mr. Clancy," she jerked out. "Tom was working late in his new house over on the Abbotsville road. He's got no view of the lake from there and he don't know nothing about what Goodhue done. Of course he don't."

She said it fiercely and confidently, but I think she realized at that minute that it was a very shaky alibi—if an alibi ever came to be required.

CHAPTER XXIII

AND that was one of the baffling features of the whole affair. Alibis seemed to be the principal thing that nobody had any of. It proved to be a tricky matter, making the necessary inquiries, for Arnold hardly let me out of his sight all that Sunday afternoon and Monday wasn't much better. The Enfields and the Russells had intended from the first to spend another week at the lake and, though there had been no limit set for me, I knew I ought to get back to New York as soon as possible, hence I felt hurried and anxious. Even so, I was well aware that I never would be satisfied until I had explored

every available channel. A lot of inquiries I had to leave to Wiggar, being assured of his discretion as of my own.

With results most ambiguous. To wit: It appeared that none of the servants had seen Louise Enfield leave the house or return to it Friday afternoon, but neither had they seen or heard her in her room and it was quite obvious that she could have gone out by the front without any of them being the wiser. Max and Eugenia seemed to take the whereabouts, each of the other, for granted, but there was no possible verification of their statements. It was the same with the people at the farm. Tom had been alone in his house all day but we couldn't find anyone who knew he was there between four o'clock and half-past six. Jared had been in Fairfield; so had Meadows. The expressman remembered Meadows and we found a grocer who had seen Jared that afternoon but that was as far as we were able to get. No one turned up who knew when either of them started for home, which, of course, proved nothing either way. Arnold had said that he believed Meadows must have been in the kitchen at Goodhue's around five-thirty because the lights were on in the studio when he reached there about that time.

Which might be a good enough alibi for Meadows, since, according to Constance's story, that was the hour when the painter left her on the other shore and started back across the lake. *If* one could take Arnold's statements as being the truth, the whole of it and nothing but . . .

However, was that possible? His story accounted, or was supposed to account, for his own movements in particular. What if he, Arnold, never went to the studio at all? What if he was quite otherwise occupied? I had never seen a man angrier than he was when he left me in my bedroom that evening. Suppose, instead of skating, he had taken the *Arrow* and sailed up the lake. It would have been quicker. Much quicker. Even in a light wind, an ice boat moves with astonishing speed as I knew both from observation and experience.

If he had suddenly, in a dangerous place, come upon the fellow he so detested, might not the temptation have been almost irresistible? Or, suppose there actually had been an accident. . . . The *Arrow* is a bow steerer and the runner plank is astern of the cockpit, as I've already mentioned. In which case, even though the sail had swung over out of the way, the skipper of the craft might not have seen the runner plank strike its victim. But he must have been conscious that he did strike something, and, looking back . . .

Arnold had made out that he was worried as to what he *would have done* if he had seen Goodhue drowning. It sounded very convincing. But wouldn't his reaction be even more understandable if he were considering what he *might* have done and did not do?

And then, in addition to all the others, there was Doctor Overton. I know he was out on the lake rather late that Friday afternoon, and Russell was certain he wasn't home when he (Russell) called there at

dusk. Was Overton really in his boat-house down on the shore? He might have been. And, quite as easily, he might not. There was only his word for it.

Then there was another point, striking to say the least. Why had he suddenly stopped drinking? It must have required an almost superhuman effort. Was it because he was afraid of what his loosened tongue might divulge if he lost control of it? It seemed probable, but who could say whether that was to protect himself, or another?

I made a point of calling on him again Monday afternoon. He was still sober, and looked ill, though he wouldn't admit that there was anything the matter. He was graver and more courteous than he had appeared previously. His remarks were shrewd but didn't seem hostile exactly.

"I see you haven't given up yet, Clancy," he said. "Caught your man measuring my ice boat this noon. He's pretty clever. Said he hoped I wouldn't mind: that you were thinking of having one built like it and wanted to get an idea of sizes. Does he tell that to all the suspects?"

Which gave me a chance to run over the possibilities, but he wouldn't admit that he had any ideas on the subject, not even that he saw, from his first view of Goodhue's back injury, how so strangely placed and violent a blow might have been inflicted.

I told him frankly that it was he, himself, that had given me the idea that Goodhue must have been struck by the hiking runner plank of an ice boat, but he only indulged in a grim laugh and said that I had too vivid an imagination to make a reliable sleuth. After which he changed the subject abruptly and wanted to know what I thought had brought Giles Landless out of his retreat that morning. Never before had the hermit participated in any excitement that occurred on the lake within the memory of man. I had wondered about that myself but had no explanation to offer.

"He's a queer chap," the doctor remarked with a thoughtful frown. "Been around, off and on, for years and yet nobody really knows much about him, I guess. Of course there are stories. . . . Some think he's crazy. Others believe he's in hiding because of some crime and still others fancy he has occult powers. He flits in and out here and there in a sort of uncanny way but so far he certainly hasn't been known to do any harm and there are rumours of strange gifts appearing unexpectedly on doorsteps in remote places where people were in trouble. . . . I saw him once in the vicinity of a lumberman's shack where the wife had fallen and broken her leg. The person who called on the phone to tell me about it wouldn't give any name. Landless vanished before I was close enough to speak to him, but I always wondered——" Overton broke off and glanced up sharply. "You haven't any idea why he came around Sunday morning, Clancy?"

I hadn't, then, but made up my mind I'd do a little investigating in that direction, for, though the doctor had tried to make his questions

seem perfectly casual, I had a hunch that he was really concerned as to what my answer would be and was relieved, on the whole, that it was in the negative and that I appeared to be only slightly interested in the subject.

I thought I'd get Wiggar to go with me since he had already established relations with the hermit but I didn't want anyone else and, as I said, it was difficult to avoid Arnold Enfield for any length of time. He was present when the sheriff called and also when Sergeant Keyes dropped in for a few minutes. The sheriff came to report to Arnold (not to me, of course) that they had found, in a desk in Goodhue's studio, letters from his lawyer, that they had been able to reach Mr. Root by phone, and that arrangements had been agreed upon to the satisfaction of all concerned. The lawyer had been appointed executor of the will, which he had in his possession. With the exception of a few small bequests, Goodhue's entire estate was to go to the well-known New York art school where he had received his early training "without cost" to himself, as stated in the will.

I insinuated a question. "Any idea what Meadows is to get, sheriff?"

"Yes. I asked about that because he's the slick kind of bird I ain't crazy about. Seems he and the caretaker of the New York studio get a hundred dollars apiece. A couple of women I never heard tell of will have a thousand each and if they was relatives or not I wouldn't know, but there wasn't no others mentioned."

I wondered if Meadows had learned of this handsome bequest but had no chance to find out until it was time to change for dinner. Wiggar, of course, would know a thing like that.

"He was furious, Mr. Peter. Quite a disgusting spectacle. His language was entirely unrestrained and savoured of Limehouse and the East End. Evidently he expected much more than he had already received for his nine years of—er—apparently unlimited service."

"Even so!" I lifted questioning eyebrows. "Do you think——"

Wiggar understood without my finishing the sentence. "I don't see how it's possible, Mr. Peter," he returned almost reluctantly. "Aside from the fact that Meadows certainly went to Fairfield Friday afternoon, there's the matter of the measurement of the ice boats. As you know, sir, I was unable to lay my hands on a steel tape or other accurate measuring device at the lake on Sunday."

I nodded and he went on. "I didn't have a chance earlier to tell you that, knowing this Tom Burton is a carpenter, I risked asking him for something of the sort. I was well aware that someone over on that shore had been watching when I took the first rough measurements out on the ice, so I didn't think it would do any harm."

He paused tentatively. I absolved him of all blame and added: "You couldn't tell who it was who was so interested in your movements?"

"It was too far away for me to be certain, sir. It was either a

man, or a woman in ski outfit, and whichever it was, he or she did not court observation."

"All right," I said. "Burton had a tape? Good! Did he make any bones about lending it?"

"Only wanted to be sure I'd return it promptly."

"And you did?"

"After checking all measurements as accurately as possible, sir. I was able to be very exact as to the distance between the transverse runner tracks we found on the ice. Fortunately they were still very clearly marked. They are precisely thirteen feet, eleven and three-quarter inches apart. I have checked my notes here as you see." He presented a little leather bound book.

"As I've already explained, Mr. Peter, owing to the fact that I found the several boats standing on uneven boards and the runner planks not entirely accessible, there being no one to help in holding the other end of the tape, I can't be sure, to the fraction of an inch, that these figures are correct."

I nodded absently, my eye travelling quickly over the neatly written page. I read:

> Track in ice made by transverse runners 13 ft. $11\frac{3}{4}$ in. apart.
> The *Derelict* approx. 14 ft. from sharp edge of one runner to that of the other.
> The *Arrow* approx. 14 ft. from sharp edge of one runner to that of the other.
> The *Flash* 14 ft. $1\frac{1}{2}$ in.

"So the *Flash* couldn't have cut those grooves in the ice, Wiggar."

"No, sir. That seems demonstrable. May I ask again, Mr. Peter, what you determined the measure of the *Clipper* to be?"

"Approximately fourteen feet," I answered, "from edge to edge."

"Then, it could have been any one of them—except the *Flash*." Wiggar's conclusion seemed obvious.

"So long as the measures are only approximate, that's all that we can make sure of," I considered aloud. "And even if we spot the boat, how are we going to determine who sailed her? Unless somehow, somewhere, we can get a sidelight on it. Do you think the hermit might know anything?"

"Landless, sir?" The durable material of which Wiggar's face is made came nearer to adapting itself to an expression of surprise than one might have thought possible.

"Doctor Overton seemed interested in the fact that he put in an appearance yesterday morning. Says it's entirely unusual, and wondered why. I, too, am beginning to wonder. Do you think he might answer questions if you were along, Wiggar? Could we manage to slip away together sometime to-morrow and make a try?"

"Certainly, Mr. Peter, if you wish." He hesitated and then said diffidently, "Did you hear, sir, that Mr. Goodhue's body is to be disposed of almost immediately?"

It was my turn to be surprised. "What?" I exclaimed. "No. The sheriff told a lot about the will and spoke of getting in touch with Goodhue's lawyer but he said nothing, in my presence at least, about a funeral or anything. Are you sure of your facts, Wiggar? How do you know?"

"Meadows, sir. They told him. I mean the sheriff did, or else he overheard. He helped find the lawyer's letter and the sheriff called long distance on Mr. Goodhue's telephone. Mr. Root (that's the lawyer) is tied down by an important case and can't leave the city for some time. So they arranged that the Fairview undertaker (a cousin of Sheriff Rolf's, by the way, sir) is to take the body in to Portland to-morrow for cremation, that being the wish of the deceased."

"The hell you say! Great Scott, Wiggar, without the corpus delicti what could we prove in any case? This cuts the time down to almost nothing. I have a hunch—a severe hunch that Giles Landless knows something. His manner Sunday morning was peculiar. Overton noticed it and I remember thinking at the time.... Yes. We'll get up early and go to the other end of the lake before breakfast. Between us we'll figure out a way to make him talk."

And that was as idle a boast as ever I made for, as Wiggar and I neared the north end of the lake a great flight of crows burst upward and circling against the grey dawn sky vanished with ugly cawing into the black tree tops far away. At the same instant we noticed a heavy drift of smoke in the air and rounding the last curve of shore, we stopped dead.

There, before us, in a cleft of icy rocks, beside a half-bound gurgling stream, were the charred and smoking remains of a small cabin, encircled by blackened melted snow at the edge of the lake and no trace whatever of Giles Landless, hermit.

ENTR'ACTE II

"BUT Peter," I cried, "you can't stop there! Go on. There must be something more!"

He took a long drink of the beautiful mint julep I had so carefully prepared and gazed out across the silver-gilt sand and the bright waters of the Gulf.

"I warned you, darling," he said, "that this was a story of unfinished business. Like Uncle Remus, I have to state very reluctantly, 'Dat's as fer as de tale goes.' Of course we hurried back to Enfield's and notified the authorities, and I was still at breakfast, telling the family about the strange occurrence when one of the maids appeared at the door. It was 'Long distance calling Mr. Peter Clancy, sir.' She divided the sentence between Enfield and myself.

"I took the message in the library. The summons was from the same source as the one that puts an end to-day to my heavenly and

all too short dalliance with you, my pet. The Government had found another job they thought a private investigator could handle to advantage. Those are assignments one doesn't sidestep in times like these and so I'm on my way again this afternoon. Wiggar is packing now and it must be almost time to hit the wet trail for St. Pete's and points north."

He pulled in his long legs, sat upright in the deck-chair, and finished the julep, setting down the glass with an air of finality. I jumped to my feet and grabbed him by the arm as he rose.

"You can't leave it like that, Peter," I protested. "Didn't anything else happen? What did they do about Landless? How do you account for his hut having burned just at that psychic moment? Surely there was some investigation of that and of his disappearance even in a remote place like Abbotsville Corners."

"I can't tell you anything more of my own knowledge," Peter replied, frowning retrospectively. "There was barely time to catch the New York express from Portland. We wouldn't have made it if Arnold hadn't had enough gas to drive in. The road was very slippery in spots and he was too busy watching it to carry on much of a conversation. I don't think he knew anything more about Landless than he'd already told me some days before, and he didn't appear to see any significance in the fact that the hermit was no longer available for questioning. Instead, he was obviously relieved (though he tried not to show it too plainly) to be able to accelerate my departure. He dropped us at the station and went on to his office. I haven't seen or heard from him since."

"Then you never even found out about Mrs. Enfield's jewels?" I asked in vast disappointment. "I mean, was Goodhue blackmailing her from the first, as her husband supposed?"

Peter shook his head. "I don't know, Zinnia, I'm sorry to say. She still doesn't seem to me to be the sort of timid person who hides a moral slip by paying tribute to a scoundrel. It's probably wishful thinking. I'm not prepared to defend my prejudices."

"Oh, dear, Peter," I said, getting in his way, "I feel as if I'd been reading one of Kelland's serials in the *Post* and couldn't possibly get hold of the last number. Can't you tell me anything more? Wasn't there anything to be found in the ruins of the hermit's cabin that morning? Do you think he went away of his own accord and burned it himself? I mean the other way round, of course."

Peter's half-smile was very brief. "We couldn't determine much of anything," he said. "There were a few footprints in the snow that I don't believe were those of the hermit, but I couldn't swear even to that. They looked too big for a man of his build. That was all I had to go on. The snow had drifted around the curve of the shore and the ice was blown clear nearly up to the edge, so there was nothing to show a trail in or out, if there was one."

I drew in a sharp breath. "Then does that mean you think someone may have set fire to the shack?"

"I think it's possible, Zinnia. It still worries me at times. You see the ashes were very hot when we got there. There were heavy beams smouldering with hot red hearts that had fallen criss-cross in a deep cellar-like hole over which his cabin had been built. If there were any remains, that's where they would have been. No possibility of an investigation until the place cooled off—and as it turned out, I couldn't be there to make it."

"But the local police," I urged. "Surely they——"

"Oh, yes," he interrupted. "They think they know all about it. Some charred pieces of bone were found and several buttons. The sheriff concluded that Landless was overcome by smoke or something and died in the burning hut. But Keyes, the trooper, wasn't so sure. It was he who wrote me about it. He thought the hermit might have cured haunches of deer meat, which he hung in that cold rocky vault. The bones didn't look right to him, but that was only his opinion and there wasn't anyone sufficiently interested in Landless to take up the matter further."

I felt foiled and defrauded. "So what, Peter ?" I asked. "Surely you've formed some opinion of your own."

He grinned. "Want me to commit myself, do you, Zinnia ? Well, I ain't a-goin'ter ! There isn't enough evidence. However, I will say this. Wiggar and I both thought there was a strong smell of kerosene about the place. We saw the remains of a little wood stove, but nothing that looked like an oil burner. Of course Landless might have had a supply for lamps. For the matter of that he might suddenly have decided to move on to other fields and pastures green, and not wishing to leave a record of any sort behind, disposed of all his effects in the most effective way possible."

"Which would imply he was planning never to come back," I suggested.

"Correct if that theory is a sound one."

"Is there another, Peter ?"

He hesitated and I thought at first he wasn't going to answer. But presently he said slowly : "Whether Landless died in that fire or not doesn't seem any more important to me right now than the question of how the fire started. If it was an accident—even if Landless set it himself and absconded, I wouldn't feel so—well, so responsible. Do you see what I mean, Zinnia ? If the hermit was an escaped lunatic, or a criminal, if, somehow, he managed to get hold of one of those ice boats and himself settled some old or fancied score with Donald Goodhue, then he's taken himself off out of my sphere of influence, so to say. . . .

"But if that fire was deliberately set by someone else, in the dead of night, beyond the reach of help, with the idea of silencing a lonely friendless man for ever, then the menace still may walk the shore of that lovely lake and a hand that has already struck twice may strike again."

"Whose hand, Peter?" His words and tone had sent a cold tremor through me and my voice sounded husky in my own ears. "You said, or hinted, that you had some definite idea. Even if it's only a guess, tell me!"

Once more he shook his head. There was a faint twinkle in his eye which was meant for me, but his mouth was grim. "No, my dear," he said, "I'm not going to put a mere hunch on record. I warned you of that to begin with. I am absolutely convinced that Goodhue was killed, and in the manner I've explained as clearly as I know how. But, of the several persons to whom the crime was possible, which of them actually committed it, I'm not prepared to state, even to you. I have no positive evidence, only my personal estimate of character, and that may be faulty—prejudiced. . . . There is even less apparent motive in this person's case than in some others." He paused in the doorway and added: "I've told you all the facts as I know them. You can see for yourself how indeterminate they are. Your guess is as good as mine, my dear. Only time will tell. . . . And that's what I'm afraid of."

He shrugged as if adjusting a burden on his broad lithe shoulders and left me to the disconsolate gnawings of excited and unappeased curiosity.

PART THREE

ZINNIA'S STORY

CHAPTER XXIV

I LEFT my friends, the Innesses, and the Island the following week. After Peter's stimulating companionship was no longer available even the soft scene and warm Florida airs had lost their charm. However, New York and the Greenwich Village part of it where I belonged proved hardly a profitable exchange. The spring sky was pale and too often sad with cold mist and rain. There was a dearth of good plays and the movies seemed puerile if they didn't deal with those dreadful early days of the war, and too horrible if they did. I don't know how to sew well and folding Red Cross dressings gets me down with an inferiority complex in my fingers. I gave my age as fifty instead of what it is and managed to donate some of my excess corpuscles. I finished a short home-nursing course, extracting from our teacher throughout only a conspicuous lack of enthusiasm for each performance, tried knitting socks with disastrous results, and retired to the fastness of my apartment in the "Village" to gnaw my ill-taught and useless fingers.

I found some writing to do, here and there, but not nearly enough to keep me from feeling restless and unprofitable. I had less at stake than most people, but the war news was so terrible I hated to read it and took to running through advertisements instead, and even society columns.

That was how I came across the notice of Max Enfield's one-man show and reception at some very swank privately owned galleries in Fifty-fourth Street. It gave me a jolt that brought to the surface once again Peter's "story without an end" which had never been very deeply submerged in my consciousness since the day he left me nothing but the loose ends to play with down in Florida.

I had telephoned his office several times only to be confronted with a blank wall. "Mr. Clancy is out of town. We can't say when he will be back. At present we have no forwarding address, but if you care to write, we will see that he gets your letters as soon as possible."

Of course I had nothing, really, to write about. I knew Peter must be up to his eyes in some important secret mission and probably had dismissed Donald Goodhue's death as a case of "Dead End Street." However, I found my interest was as strong as ever, even stronger perhaps, and I determined to go to young Enfield's show and see what I could see.

Which wasn't much. Peter's expressed lack of enthusiasm for such works of art had warned me and I wasn't disappointed in the pictures. Nor was I, to tell the truth, in my reception. The combination of a Press card and a gown from "Francine" is an "open sesame" to most places. I got Bill Gorham of the *Meteor* to go along and we cut quite a swath. I singled out Max from Peter's description and his mother from early recollections of Louise Fontanelli whose dancing I, too, had seen and admired.

I introduced myself and Bill to Max and after a short chat, he presented us to his mother, who took "the Press" in charge with a graciousness and charm calculated to soften any carping critic's jaded heart.

Naturally, I avoided all mention of Peter Clancy, but there were some crazily distorted pictures of Lake Kearsarge that I pretended to recognize and so brought up an innocent point of contact. Louise Enfield responded with pleasant cordiality to my mention of the Norton cottage and my having taken my meals at the Rolf farm. We talked about Maine and its beauties for some time, compared notes about fishing, and so forth, and had a very companionable chat. During which it came to me, with a strangely reluctant feeling in the pit of my stomach, that come spring, I was going up to the lake again. I even mentioned the possibility.

She said, "How nice!" and seemed to mean it. She had met the Nortons many years ago and any friend of theirs, etcetera. The like experience had been mine before. Any fisher, man or woman, O.K.d by the Nortons, was a welcome addition to any camp made up of the same type of enthusiast.

"We always go up in the spring, as soon as the season opens," she said. "It's heavenly then. Not too many people, and no motorboats, now."

I marked the slight hesitation before the last word, remembering how annoyed we all were because Donald Goodhue put one on the lake that first year when he came, and the last year before the Nortons moved on to deeper fastnesses.

Donald Goodhue.

The name stared up at me from the pages of the *Meteor* not more than a week later. The late Donald Goodhue. An important exhibition and sale of his paintings, the paper announced. It was to include early and late examples of his genius. With Peter's story still nagging, that was enough for me. I was at the Andrews Galleries when the doors opened and was struck by a thrill of interest and excitement when I saw a very well-dressed, broad shouldered man standing on the steps above and before me.

Of course I couldn't be certain but I was almost sure, from Peter's description, that this must be Arnold Enfield himself, in the flesh, but not so much of it as I had been led to picture.

He looked at me carelessly as he stopped to get a catalogue, in

which he was immediately engrossed. I also obtained a copy but, watching him out of the tail of my eye, I saw him turning the pages hurriedly, his face becoming an angry dark red as he strode off to the farthest end of the room, glancing only at the numbers and not at the pictures as he went.

I moved down the other side of the gallery until I was nearly opposite when he stopped in front of a tall canvas. If his face had been red before, it was purple now. I could take a good look without attracting his attention, which was completely absorbed by the bold, colourful, and extremely realistic painting of a gorgeous young creature in diaphanous ballet costume, leaning pensively on a window-sill in a position to bring out all the points of feminine pulchritude in which the artist was evidently most interested. I thought, if that was painted from memory, as Goodhue had told Peter, it certainly was an amazing performance, for the resemblance to Louise Fontanelli, as I remembered her, and also to the present Mrs. Arnold Enfield, as I had seen her the week before, was unmistakable.

The man in front of the picture ground his teeth and crushing the catalogue in a strangling grip hurried back to the receptionist's desk.

The auction sale did not begin until an hour later and there weren't many people about, so I had a good view of the altercation there which terminated abruptly when Max Enfield came hurrying through the door. The other man saw him, they met half-way, came at the double-quick down the long room and stopped opposite the canvas, Number 127 in the catalogue, called "Fond Memories."

Of course there could be no longer any doubt in my mind as to the identity of the older man. Max was a younger and less determined edition of his father but his rage was equally apparent.

I didn't dare to get near enough to hear what was said for fear Max might recall the newspaper woman who had attended his own exhibition, and though Bill had wangled a good notice of it in the *Meteor*, I was afraid that wouldn't excuse my hanging around to any obvious extent. However, what went on was pretty apparent even from a comparative distance.

They had been talking in furious undertones for only a few minutes when two men, one very dapper, the other in a slightly seedy grey suit, came in and were stopped by the perturbed girl at the desk. After a few words they both glanced quickly down the room and then began a hurried argument which seemed hardly finished when the two men approached and introduced themselves in some sort of way to the Enfields.

I was painstakingly examining the paintings in that vicinity and making elaborate if illegible notes in my catalogue, the while my ear tried to stretch itself and my eye scouted at intervals as far as the contending group opposite. Once I heard the seedy man say in a raised voice something about "protecting the interests of the other creditors as well," and from the vehemence with which he spoke I

wondered if the Art School, as residuary legatee, would get much more than Wiggar's disappointed and disappointing fellow-countryman—what was his name? Ah, yes: Meadows.

The four men went on talking and I sort of backed over, in an absent, spellbound way, and sat down on one of the flat benches half-way across the room, of course keeping my back turned in their direction. I couldn't hear very much better but gathered, from the few words I was lucky enough to catch, that Arnold Enfield was threatening to bring suit if something (which I lost) wasn't done. Then the dapper man, who was facing in my direction, said to the seedy one, "Don't you think you'd be wise, Mr. Wallace, to agree to Number 127 being put up this morning, instead of having the auctioneer take it in its regular order? There'll be a good turnout. You see people are already gathering——"

I could see that, too, and that the fact made the Enfield men more uneasy than before. While I happened to be looking in the direction of the main entrance, I noticed a man who had just come in and who, after one sharp glance down the room, made his way quickly over to the end of the lines of seats and dropped into one that was half-hidden by a decorative arrangement of flowers and greenery in a huge Chinese pot. After which I was sure I caught a protruding glassy eye peering through a gap in the leaves, still in the direction of the colloquy, which broke up almost immediately thereafter. The dapper man went back to the reception desk, the seedy one made a hurried exit and stopped at a telephone booth in the entrance hall. He was still closed in one of them when Arnold Enfield entered another several places farther along. I moved in that direction and almost ran into Max who had suddenly turned back with an air of angry indecision.

He lifted the hat he had just assumed, murmured an excuse and was about to pass on when he recognized me.

"Oh," he said. "Miss—er—Hartley, isn't it? You were at my show. I remember. That was a very satisfactory criticism the *Meteor* gave me. Thanks a lot!"

I didn't write it but I wasn't altruistic enough to put in a disclaimer. I said something polite, I don't know what, for I saw his eye cut back to the all-too-frankly pictured charms of the girl who was to become his mother and then return to me, measuring the distance, which was now far from incriminating. I put on my blandest smile, said I thought the exhibition far less interesting than I had expected, which he took as an implied compliment to his own by comparison, and, his father appearing at that minute, he said, "Good-bye" and hurried off.

I must confess I was very much surprised that neither of them was remaining for the sale. Had I failed completely in the inferences I had drawn from the few words I had been able to catch? Hadn't Mr. Wallace authority to act for the other creditors even to the limited extent of putting up for auction one picture ahead of some others in

the catalogue, and that in the face of a threatened suit? Weren't they going to offer "Fond Memories" for sale that morning, after all? And, if my curiosity couldn't be appeased otherwise, would I have to hang around the Andrews Galleries for days perhaps to see what would be the ultimate outcome?

I was standing there, anxious and undecided, when the dapper gentleman appeared at an inner door in company with a man in an overall carrying a stepladder. They proceeded at once to the picture that possibly was more or less responsible for its delineator's horrible demise, and removed it with great care, substituting another in its stead and carrying it to take its place along with those displayed on easels upon the platform at the opposite end of the room.

So I had guessed right, after all. . . . I slid into a seat over toward the far wall where I could get a restricted view of the entrance as well as a much nearer eye-risk on the retiring creature behind the potted rhododendrons.

Not prepossessing, I considered, and somehow distinctly out of character with his surroundings. His conventional morning dress should have been correct, and somehow wasn't. His face was round and pale, and the scouting eyes at the moment were decidedly on the shifty side. Anxious, I thought them, even apprehensive. . . . Suddenly they swerved away from an intent observation of the entrance, their owner crouched lower. I turned my head quickly and who should I see entering, with the calm of a hard-boiled egg, but Peter Clancy's valet, the perfect and only Wiggar.

He seated himself unostentatiously near the exit. The auctioneer stepped up on the platform. The bidding began. Only two pictures were sold at a good price when "Fond Memories" was brought forward. The dapper man made occasion to say something in the auctioneer's ear. I noted with a good deal of quiet satisfaction that the name of the painting was not mentioned, only the catalogue number. It was intelligently described as an early work, a genre subject, quite fanciful, but an excellent example of the artist's first manner.

Fortunately, I thought, it's too realistic to catch the modern collector's fancy, for the bids came in slowly and were extremely low considering the reputation of the painter. The size, too, would make it undesirable for a private home, and the subject also. Still——

The auctioneer's tones were urgent. "A large canvas by one of our greatest American painters! Do I hear five hundred? Four hundred and seventy-five, I'm offered! Do I hear the five?"

I was conscious that the man behind the flowery screen had leaned forward and for the first time I heard his voice. "Five hundred," he said in a clipped British accent.

"Five hundred," intoned the auctioneer. "Do I hear the fifty? Five hundred, do I hear——"

"Six hundred." I would have known that clear, steady, deliberate voice if I'd heard it in Death Valley or on the heights of Thibet. I

didn't have to look around. Wiggar was on the job. I felt a surge of delight, quite incommensurate with the importance to me of the matter in hand.

"Six hundred!" The auctioneer's face lost some of its depression. "Do I hear seven? Six hundred I'm bid."

"Six hundred and ten." This from out the rhododendrons.

"Oh, come, sir, is that all? Six hundred and ten——"

"Seven hundred." Wiggar's tone was as serene and unaccented as before. It seemed to speak of limitless horizons.

"Seven hundred and ten." The bid, from the previous source, sounded less cocky.

Wiggar didn't wait for the auctioneer. "Eight hundred," he announced. I could picture him sitting there, his neat bowler hat and stick across his knees, everything about him in perfect trim and not a shade of expression in his English-muffin face.

The comeback from amid the flowers wasn't so quick this time, but it came: "Eight hundred and five."

The auctioneer peered around the bush with a supercilious smile. "I am offered eight hundred and five dollars for this magnificent example of a master's early work, probably the best of that charming period of existence. Surely the gentleman will not drop out now. Eight hundred and five, I'm offered! Going! Going——"

"One thousand." Wiggar's voice sounded stern in the sudden silence—or was it only my fancy?

By leaning far back I could see the pale moon-face of the only other contender. It wore a vicious look of snarling disappointment.

The tones of the auctioneer sounded but faintly in my ear. "Going! Going! Gone!! Sold, for one thousand dollars!"

The hammer fell. For me the auction was over. I made the best of my way out and laid in wait for Wiggar in the hall.

CHAPTER XXV

THE first question I asked was, of course, "Is Mr. Peter in town?"

Wiggar had done me the honour several years ago to accept me as a safe risk as far as his master's state of single blessedness was concerned, and his manner was not only courteous but might almost have been considered effusive if the like could have been demonstrated by a beautifully rolled silk umbrella.

"Only for the day, Miss Hartley, I'm sorry to say. He's flying west early this evening and was too busy to attend here himself when Mr. Enfield called."

"Then it's no use my trying?" We moved to the door.

"I'm afraid not." Wiggar held it open for me and followed just as his rival in bidding hailed a Madison Avenue car from the corner of the street.

"Who was that ?" I asked and added quickly, "I bet I know. It was Goodhue's butler, Meadows, wasn't it ?"

"Mr. Peter told you——" Wiggar suggested cautiously.

"The whole story of your various sporting events at Lake Kearsarge last winter," I answered promptly. "It was Meadows' bright idea to carry on his late master's unfinished project, do you think ?"

"Mr. Peter considered that a possibility and I was forewarned and, as I may say, forearmed. Mr. Enfield said I was to go on bidding up to ten thousand and if it seemed to be going higher I was to ask for a recess and call him. I think he may be quite satisfied with the result. From what I know of this fellow Meadows, I deduced that he was beginning to waver when he raised me only by tens and fives, and I believed a sudden jump would frighten him out of the ring. Which it did," Wiggar finished with becoming modesty.

"What do you suppose will become of the picture now ?" I wondered.

"It's to be crated and shipped to Maine. I just stopped to give the necessary instructions."

I don't know why I asked, "To Portland ? Or up to the lake ?"

"It's to be held in the express office in Fairfield for further instructions." Wiggar's eye was slightly speculative.

"He would destroy it, wouldn't he ?"

"If it were a portrait of my son's mother, I should think so indeed," was the prompt response.

"You have a son, Wiggar ?" I was surprised at the feeling in his deep voice.

"Oh, no, Miss Hartley, and of course he has no mother, but if it were otherwise——"

"I see what you mean, Wiggar, and probably Mr. Enfield and Max feel the same. Well, give my best to Peter Clancy and tell him I'll be glad to see you both at the "Latchstring" this summer if you get any time off. You know it's always hanging out."

He thanked me and departed. I had no idea then that Peter would take it for granted that I intended to spend the entire season in the little old Connecticut homestead left me by my uncle.

I did go up to Woldcott Street earlier than usual that year, and I was still there when, to my surprise, I received a letter from Peter.

Dear Zinnia, it said. *Knowing your avidity for odd and shocking tales I'm sure you will recall the one I told you in Florida, about Donald Goodhue and the queer circumstances surrounding his death. One of which was the burning of the hermit's cabin at the far end of the lake and the presumption by the authorities that Giles Landless was burned to death in his bed. Remember? Not that anyone, so far as I know, ever connected the two tragedies. Except me. I thought the elimination of Landless might have some value to somebody. I hadn't much to go on, and I have little more now, but I thought it might interest you to*

know that there's a good deal of reason to believe that Landless is still alive. At least a man, giving that name, called at my New York office a week ago and asked for me. I was in California at the time and he left at once without seeing anyone else or leaving an address. The girl at the desk was new and couldn't give much of a description . Apparently he was not dressed as I saw him in Maine for I think that deerskin outfit would have registered even with the beautiful but dumb. However, this is a pretty uncommon name and I don't see why anyone would want to impersonate him. So it looks to me as if the hermit is alive and if he ever tries to get in touch with me again I may be able to add another paragraph to your tale.

Keep on being just as you are, lovely and adored one, and believe me
Ever your hopeless admirer,

PETER CLANCY.

P.S. Wiggar says we're invited to pull the Latchstring again. I ought to get a vacation some time in midsummer and may take you up. Keep the latch well oiled but don't get that way yourself.

Love,

PETER.

Midsummer seemed a long way off, and that letter only whetted my appetite for more. I wrote to Peter but heard nothing further about the hermit, and that picturesque figure began to haunt my dreams. It was pretty ridiculous, but I kept wondering why his shack burned, or *was* burned, how, when and why he disappeared, and what could have been the object of his recrudescence in so un-hermit-like a place as New York City.

It only needed the sight of my fishing tackle, one of those early days when I was going over the little ancient head-bumping attic, to suddenly decide me that I really was going back to the old stamping ground on Kearsarge.

On an impulse I dragged the canvas rod cases and the battered japanned tin boxes of flies, leaders, reels and lures downstairs with me, put in a long-distance call and as if by magic, heard Mary Rolf's voice over the wire.

"Hello there! Who? Who did you say? Oh! Oh! Miss Zin! For mercy's sake! Where are you? Connecticut? Well, for crying out loud!

"Yes! Yes! Boys say they're biting good.

"No-o," regretfully. "We got the young school-teacher to board. But, say. How about the Norton cottage? Tom's fixed it all up nice. Just done over. Plumbing 'n' everything. . . . Take your meals here? Course you can.

"Sure enough. Sooner the better. . . . Eh? Who's Henry? Oh, your car? A Ford. I see. Well, I won't ask where you get the gas, but——

"You'll phone from Fairview. Good! Everything'll be ready

and dinner on the table. Gosh, I'll be glad. Yes. Sure. Good-bye!"

It was all arranged in the twinkling of an eye and I was committed to the glory of a Maine spring and all that was to go with it. If I hadn't unearthed my fishing tackle that May morning, then the water that for ever runs over the dam might have carried other flotsam and jetsam to the eternal ocean. Not that I regret anything now. The Mills of God grind slowly and who am I even to consider the possibility that I ever could have been in a position to put a spoke in the wheel.

The first day I was out on the lake I saw Louise Enfield casting expertly around some rocks near the south end. She was alone in her boat and I in mine. It's pretty difficult to row one's self and get in any amount of casting, especially if one very much prefers to stand up in order to get out more line, as obviously she did, and I do too.

I called "Yoo-hoo." She answered with a friendly "Hi," stowed her rod, and rowed right over.

"Miss Hartley! So glad. Mary told us you were coming. Wonderful day. Had any luck so far?"

The net result of the subsequent friendly, somewhat prolonged conversation was a shift of tackle and personnel, and agreement to spell each other at the oars, four very likely lake trout and the beginnings of an acquaintance that was to develop by leaps and bounds.

I found myself spending more and more time on the Enfields side of the lake. Not that the little old Norton cottage wasn't comfortable. Tom Burton had done an excellent job and he was as pleasant, shy, and friendly as the last time I'd seen him when he was just a young lad doing chores about the farm, and very much overworked we thought then by his stepfather.

I gradually got it out of him that it was something I'd said about "anyone could do or be anything they wanted if they wanted it *enough*," that made him pull out and work his way through a high school in Portland that gave an extra fine manual training course.

"He's the best carpenter in Maine," his mother bragged. "And talks as good American as Connie does; you see if he don't, Miss Zin."

He did. And also I thought he talked with her as long and as often as his diffidence would permit. I found the girl as lovely to look at as Peter had given me to expect. She seemed more reserved than her years ought to warrant, however, and there was something in her gravity that I didn't like. She was *sweet* to Mary Rolf, affectionate and helpful to an unusual degree and seemed to be more at ease when working with the mistress of the farm where she boarded than at any other time. I noticed that she rarely went out alone except to and from school. She didn't seem like a timid city product and I wondered if she knew or sensed something, some element of danger that no one else was wise to. No one, unless it was Mary. . . .

For Mary Rolf had changed. Considerably. She was just as cordial and friendly to me as in the old days; perhaps more so. But when she wasn't talking—and that was much oftener than I would have thought possible—her face wore a troubled brooding look and, most curious of all, her cooking was no longer superlatively fine. It was not that I'm older and therefore more pernickety than I had been. Jared was the only one who was mean enough to mention it, but he complained early and late.

"You got to do better," I heard him growl after one particularly unsuccessful meal," or this girl won't stay here, and if she leaves——"

I saw Constance wince when he patted her shoulder, and she took occasion to speak more tenderly and affectionately to Mary as soon as he was out of the house.

I hoped it was only a fatherly interest that Jared was developing but it didn't look much like it to my perhaps too sophisticated eyes. Jared must have been over fifty, but at that he was somewhat younger than Mary. . . . The presence in the house of that exquisitely beautiful young creature. . . . But I had always thought that the principal reason a cheerful, open-handed woman like Mary would have married a tight-fisted dour selfish fellow like Jared was because it was the best opportunity offered her to provide for her young son. Jared was handsome in his way and I understood that his courtship of pretty Mary Burton had been ardent enough to cause considerable comment from the more repressed and self-conscious but gossipy neighbours.

Therefore I could hardly attribute the change in Mary Rolf to ordinary jealousy. Rather it seemed to me—or at least I fancied it, if my first premise was correct—that Mary was more concerned lest the young school-teacher should be shocked or offended. . . . And there was Tom, the apple of her eye. I'm not one of these romantic old maids, but there wasn't any doubt in my mind as to what Tom's feeling for the girl must be, though he never intruded it upon her so far as I could see.

I can't help getting interested in people; I had always liked and admired Mary Rolf for her sterling qualities and I was oppressed more than I should have been otherwise by the situation at the farm, which was suddenly rendered more acute by an accident that happened to Tom, one that might well have been fatal except for his strength, agility and instantaneous reaction.

It seems he had been making necessary repairs on the roof of the huge old Rolf hay barn. It had taken several days, since he had no one to help him, but the work was finished at last and he had started to descend the long extension ladder when it slipped out from under him. He felt it going and somehow managed, by a superhuman effort to hurl it sideways and instead of the granite-rock-paved driveway he landed on a heap of pea-brush which, to some extent, broke his fall.

I heard Mary screaming and met her, running down toward the shore.

"Doctor Overton," she panted. "Tom's hurt. Bad! He's the nearest doctor and the best help——"

"I'll go." I didn't stop for details but plunged on down the slope.

Mary hesitated an instant and then ran back up the hill. I reached the landing in a second or two and was about to shove off the boat I used when there was a hail from a little way out on the lake.

"What's the matter up there?"

It was the doctor. I recognized him, of course, for I had seen him before, though only from a distance.

"Help!" I called. "Tom Burton! Hurt!"

His oars splashed as he spun his boat and headed for shore.

We rushed up the path together. Mary had already managed to get Tom to the house. He lay on a big couch in the living-room, his face white and drawn with pain. The doctor went over him with expert thoroughness.

"A dislocated shoulder and some minor injuries," was the report. "Don't worry, Mary. I don't think there's anything serious. Better let him stay where he is. I'll fix him up. You heat some water——"

His voice was strong and kind and he gave the anxious mother plenty to do. A capable, sober and sympathetic physician. I liked him on the spot.

And it was some days later before it occurred to me to wonder whether it was merely by chance that he had happened to be fishing so near the Rolf shore on that particular afternoon.

CHAPTER XXVI

CHANCE. How many are the strange happenings that we lightly cover by that convenient and widely-embracing word!

And yet—was it only chance that made it necessary for Tom's mother, for some days thereafter, to insist on keeping him at the farm under her wing? That threw Connie and Tom into so much more intimate contact than if he had remained in the little house he had built with his own hands over on the Abbotsville road. Was it nothing but a merely accidental combination of circumstances that brought Peter Clancy and me, at different periods and for widely diverse reasons, to this little known part of Maine, and into close and curious touch with the oddly assorted human beings there that lived such different lives? The indigenous farm element; the wealthy summer contingent; the little school-teacher; the retired, some-time-discredited surgeon, and even, in some sense, the vanished Meadows, the disappearing hermit—and the dead painter, whose story, if not his ghost, seemed to haunt the twilight of the lonely lake. All these were a part of the moving picture that developed in successive reels

until the fateful climax when the lights flashed up and we read, with awed and beating hearts, "The End."

But that was later. In the meantime it was wonderful how friendly every one of those people were to me, Louise Enfield in particular. We fished together a great deal. Sometimes Max and Eugenia joined us for a swim or a picnic, and, more rarely, Arnold was of the party. I didn't feel altogether comfortable with him, for I was pretty sure I knew why he spent so much of his time attending to his affairs in Portland and New York and I was not surprised that his manner was often constrained, though it was so well controlled that I could only wonder if he was oppressed by guilt of his own, or doubt of a like feeling in the breast of someone near and dear to him.

The big studio, high up on the point, was closed and I noticed that no one willingly spoke of the distinguished painter who had lived there. Once, when Arnold was in the boat and we were working the north end of the lake, I spotted the place where the hermit's cabin had once been and suggested that we land and have our supper near the mouth of the stream we could hear gurgling down through the shadows of the trees. He demurred sharply but gave no reason, only pointing out, instead, a little sandy beach at some distance, where we had often been before.

I never met Doctor Overton anywhere except when he was attending Tom at the farm. If there had ever been any intimacy between him and the Enfields (and of that I had no reason to be sure) it was now practically non-existent and, of course, I was keen to know the cause, if any.

I sounded Louise but she was non-committal. If she knew or guessed a reason she kept it carefully to herself. They used to see more of him, but he had always gone his own way and they never interfered, was her only comment and, as she had a strike at that minute, the subject was not reopened.

However, I was very curious, and one day shortly after Tom's accident, when I had an impulse to go over the scene of it and was still near the entrance of the hay barn, I saw the doctor coming from the house and hailed him.

"Look here, if you have a minute, Doctor Overton," I called. "I want to ask you something."

He responded with no apparent hesitation. "What is it, Miss Hartley?" he asked, stopping at the end of the slightly inclined approach which was paved with rough granite blocks set edgeways in the dirt.

I went down to him. "Would you think an experienced carpenter would be so careless as to place the foot of an extension ladder on these slippery slanting sunken stones——"

"That's a lot of s's," the doctor laughed. "Bet you couldn't say that over again and say it fast."

I was too upset by something that had just occurred to me even to smile.

"Yes," I said shortly, "but I mean it, Doctor Overton. See. This is where the foot of the ladder had been when I came out here directly after Tom was hurt. The top of it had fallen over in that pile of white birch brush but the foot was right here," and I stamped one of the smooth stones with an indignant rubber sole. "The ladder's been put away, of course," I added, "but you can accept my findings as correct."

"Hmm-m-m," he murmured. I thought he changed colour and I'm sure he looked at me very sharply but all he said was : "It seems a poor place, but all carpenters get careless at times, I suppose."

I moved along a few steps and pointed up to the roof where the new shingles showed bright and clean against the old moss and lichen-covered shakes. "There's where Tom was working," I said half to myself. "Why didn't he set the ladder here in the long smooth grass where——"

I stooped suddenly and pressed hard down on the yielding coverage. There was reason, I saw, for the faint slanting twisting of the long blades, for the earth beneath bore an unmistakable short, deep and narrow dent. I dropped on my knees and felt the grass over, inch by inch. About two feet to the right there was another depression of the same size and depth. With my fingers still pressed down and hidden in it, I twisted sideways to look up into a steady, perfectly blank face.

"Come with me, Miss Hartley, and be quick about it." The voice was peremptory and the hand that jerked me unceremoniously to my feet was strong and purposeful.

I wasn't scared—exactly. The house was near and Mary or Jared or somebody would hear if I called. The doctor drew me hurriedly out of the yard. As soon as we were on the path again his manner changed abruptly. He became very courteous, begged my pardon if he had startled me; said if he were me he would try not to show a suspicious nature. It made people very uncomfortable; and after all the fact that the ladder had perhaps been set in different places at various times didn't necessarily mean anything. Tom had been working there for several days and might well have found it convenient to shift the ladder any number of times.

"I wouldn't say anything about it," he looked at me very hard, "*to anyone.*"

Well, what Doctor Overton said was fair enough, but the way he hustled me out of the farmyard was something else again. Why did he do that if there was nothing suggestive about the placing of Tom's ladder on those slippery, slanting, sunken stones ? I couldn't laugh and I didn't try to say it fast when the phrase repeated itself in my troubled mind.

It didn't seem like Tom Burton to be that careless. But, just suppose he hadn't been. . . . Suppose, while he was busy out of sight on the roof, hammering away, someone had shifted the ladder

from its safe footing. . . . It wouldn't have been much of a stunt. The distance was inconsiderable, and the changed position at the roof-edge would have been so slight as to be almost certain to pass unnoticed.

The idea was so simple and at the same time so devilish that I was ashamed of having the kind of mind that could even see and recognize the possibility.

And who was there who could want to hurt Tom? Was there some evil spirit abroad in those lovely woods or afloat on that calm and peaceful lake? Peter had been certain that Goodhue's death involved a criminal act even if it wasn't premeditated murder. . . . He had much the same ideas, I felt sure, about the burning of the hermit's cabin. . . . Was this another of those overt acts? Did the hermit—did Tom—know something that made them both a menace to the safety of—someone?

In spite of Doctor Overton's warning, I made up my mind to sound Tom upon the subject. My first opportunity came that very same noon. Mary had his tray ready early, but she was cooking something on top of the stove that needed watching and I offered to take it in to him. She accepted gladly.

"Here's your lunch," I called out, pushing open the living-room door with my foot and kicking it shut behind me. "Ours isn't ready and I'm hungry as a bear. Mind if I snitch one of these biscuits? I'll get you another if you run short."

"Help yourself. Mum always gives me more than a man can eat when he has to lie up for repairs." Tom pulled himself higher on his improvised bed and grinned at me cheerfully. "Doc says I'll be able to be up and around to-morrow. He's been swell, hasn't he? Patched me up in great shape! Has Mum told you about the picnic?"

"No," I said, reaching over to borrow the butter knife. "What picnic?"

"Maybe I shouldn't have mentioned it. I guess it's going to be a surprise." Tom grinned indulgently. "Can you act surprised when she springs it?"

"I sure can," I said quickly. "In fact I'm surprised right now but about something else. I was down by the hay barn just a little while ago and I happened to notice the fool place where you put your ladder the other day. No wonder it slid out from under you. I should have thought a smart carpenter would have known better than to set the foot of it on those slanting stones."

He stopped with a fork full of creamed chicken half-way to his mouth and stared at me. "What stones are you talking about?" he asked, shifting his gaze to a spot in mid-air over my head.

"Those on the ramp that goes up to the barn door," I mentioned lightly.

"Oh," he said. "Those."

He put the food in his mouth, chewed silently and swallowed before he hazarded another question. "What put it into your head that I did such a thing, Miss Zin ?"

"Well, nothing, except that's where the bottom end of the ladder happened to be when I saw it just after the doctor came. The top was over in the pea brush, you know. That's why you weren't hurt worse. Lucky for you."

He picked up a tall glass of milk and drank it all before he said, with an odd short laugh, "Well, Miss Zin, if a dog's entitled to one bite, can't you forgive a poor carpenter for making a fool of himself at least once in a way ?"

"All right, but don't make a practice of it," I said, with considerable emphasis, the while I debated whether or not to tell him of Doctor Overton's strange reaction to the same proposition when it had been put to him upon the spot.

Mary came in just then with Tom's dessert and I had no further opportunity even if I had decided to do so.

She sat down beside me and as eager as a child brought up her project of taking us for an all-day picnic down to the shore.

"Connie will be free because it's Saturday," she rattled happily along. "Jared's going to be gone all day up to Burham Woods with the team. We can have the car. He hates all kinds of motors like poison and the Ford I drive belongs to Tom, anyway, though he bought it just for his old mother to use. I'd rather drive than eat, but I've been saving gas like nobody's business, so that's all right. Louise Enfield's coming and you, Miss Zin, of course, if you will, and me and Tom. We'll have lunch on the beach and anybody that likes water that cold can take a swim beforehand. We'll get there early enough. On the way back we can stop at Uncle Joe's if you care to. Louise says she's always wanted to see what it's like and never has. The Maine Desert, you know, Miss Zin. Have you ever seen it ?"

"No, Mary, I haven't. What fun ! I've noticed the road signs often but never stopped. Is it really something to see ?"

"Well ! Tain't so much for a person's been around like you have, I guess," she replied. "But it's curious, and it's not far off the main road. Joe Trask's my uncle and he's something, anyhow. He's old and twisted but strong as a hickory stick. Wasn't much more'n a boy when the big fire come that burned off all the grass and scrub around the place. Then come the rain and washed the loam away, and after that the sand began to blow in on the farm. Nothing they could do to stop it. It ate up the crops and the woods 'n' everything. Some people would have just set down and let it blow over them too. But you know what Uncle Joe done ? When he saw there was no hope of saving the farm he moved part of the old house out nearer to the south edge of his land in a place sheltered from the winds, and let the sand take the rest of the house and the barns and the orchard. . . . And he put signs up all along the road.

'Twenty-five cents to see the Maine Desert!' Now, would you believe it, he makes more money in the summer than any of the farmers round about just setting on his porch watching the wind do the work."

Mary laughed cheerfully as she finished her story, so characteristic of the Maine temperament, sturdy, with relentless courage, to make the best of a devastating situation.

I looked at Tom, so calm, pleasant and self-contained, and wondered if he, too, might be like that. . . . It came to me again that perhaps I'd better make an opportunity to tell him of those dents I found in the grass alongside the wall of the hay barn, and about Doctor Overton. . . .

And suddenly I decided to write to Peter Clancy. It might be like shooting an arrow into the air, he was so busy and so often on the move these days, but a queer uneasiness oppressed me. I didn't write that afternoon as I had intended, for Louise called up to say she was going out fishing and would I come along? It was such a perfect day, overcast but not raining, and she said there were big fish rising all along the shore.

So I put off writing to Peter until evening, and when I did I had more, much more, to tell him.

CHAPTER XXVII

LOUISE rowed over and we fished along the farm side of the lake at first. Our friendship had long since progressed to first names and was steadily developing into real intimacy. I found her a fascinating person, youthful, vivid, enthusiastic and alert; keen on sport, a woman of the world, but with a kind of impulsive naïveté that appealed to me very strongly, and I didn't wonder that Peter Clancy had felt the same.

Curiously enough (or perhaps it wasn't) she had never happened to mention his name in my hearing. Neither had anyone else, and, for some reason I had never troubled to explain even to myself. I never spoke of my friendship for and admiration of that redheaded great-grandson of Erin.

To-day, in spite of perfect weather conditions, the fish seemed utterly unwilling to accept any of our Judas' offerings of refreshment. In disgust, Louise decided to troll awhile. We let the boat drift along, and sat down for a chat and a cigarette.

With Peter in my mind and quite without premeditation I asked suddenly: "Wasn't it along here somewhere that that painter—what was his name—oh, yes, Goodhue—was drowned last winter?" Her eyes narrowed and I added hastily. "I read about it in the papers, and saw an exhibition of his paintings recently. Quite interesting. Didn't you think so?"

"I suppose you're referring to his pictures." Her spoon was

trailing over the stern and she drew the line in with short smooth little pulls to keep it fluttering. "I didn't go to the sale but of course I'm familiar with his work. His studio is up there where you see the roof. He painted a good many of his later pictures there."

"Yes. I think I understood that," I said, moving the oars just enough to keep her line from fouling. "I even recognized one of them I believe. At least it looked so much like Connie Dangerfield I feel sure she must have been the inspiration, even if she didn't actually pose for it."

"Didn't Mary Rolf ever tell you anything about that?" She glanced up at me with eyes that looked as candid as those of a child.

"No," I answered truthfully. "She didn't. Was there—er—anything? I interviewed the man once some years ago, and he didn't give me the impression that he even bothered to put on sheep's clothing."

"Oh, but he could, when he wanted to, and get away with it." Louise stood up, and made a cast with a sharp, almost angry, gesture. "You should have seen the tricks he pulled on that dear child last winter! It made my blood boil. I did everything in my power to protect her. I guess over at the farm they did, too. But he had Connie fooled completely—up to the very last—I believe."

"Poor kid! Was she very much in love with him, do you think, Louise?"

She let her line trail after the boat, looked up into the grey sky and shook her lovely bright head. "She was fascinated and flattered, of course. He was so famous, so chivalrous, so humble and devoted. I believe he seemed to her the ideal, perfect, gentle knight until the very last." She turned her rod and began to reel in slowly.

"You know, Zingara," she went on thoughtfully, "Mary says that something happened between them the evening before he—before he died. Some horrid thing that he did or said, that opened the poor girl's eyes completely. I love Connie deeply and I think she loves me, but she's never spoken to me about it, nor I to her, naturally. However, I think the horror of that whole experience has gradually worn itself out and she's beginning definitely to respond to the sincere affection of a man whom we all admire——"

She broke off suddenly and stood up with a lurch that came near to putting the side of the boat under.

"Look, Zin," she cried, motioning toward the woods that rose steeply up behind the studio roof on the point. "Smoke! There shouldn't be smoke coming from there. If the woods catch—a forest fire—we may all——"

She had already dropped to the other thwart and had the second pair of oars in the rowlocks before I could take another long breath.

"Pull!" she cried through clenched teeth. "Ready! Right!"

We both swung on the right oar. The boat spun in its own length in the water and headed for the boat-house and the path that led up to the dead man's deserted house.

"God grant it's a fire that's being watched—trash or something. Scouts don't come in this far unless——" Louise panted as we plunged up the slope. "May be all right. Can't take chances in these pine woods——"

I've never had occasion to develop a fire-fighting technique and I wondered what we were supposed to do, but Louise showed no uncertainty or hesitation and I was sufficiently game to follow her lead.

It couldn't have been five minutes, though it seemed longer, when we emerged on a clearing of untended grass and inconsequentially gay spring flowers, blooming defiantly as if for their own divertissement. The building looked sullen and blind with boarded windows. Louise hardly glanced at it but pointed to the tops of the dark trees brooding over the grey ghostly reflection of sky in the glass of the slanting studio light. Against the dark foliage a thin column of smoke continued to rise.

"It's behind the house," she said, pausing for an instant to catch her breath. "May be nothing dangerous, but no one comes here now and—— Come on, Zin. We'll have to see——"

There was a little sighing wind and the sound of the swaying boughs drowned our footsteps even when we stepped out on the neglected drive. I could smell the smoke now; not refuse, not burning leaves——

We turned the corner of the house.

In the middle of an open space, between it and the garage, a small fire of boards was burning brightly and beside it, their backs toward us, were two men.

Louise cried out and ran forward. "Arnold! What—— My dear! What are you—— And Max! Whatever made you——"

She stopped short as both men turned at the sound of her voice. Between them they were holding the top and bottom of a canvas that stood edgeways across the centre of a small heap of glowing coals, the flames just beginning to lick up the thick paint with eager tongues. They both seemed stunned, too startled to move or speak.

Louise stepped swiftly forward, her eyes fixed in puzzled horror on the face of the picture. "Where did this come from? How did you get it? When was it painted? Did Don——"

She left the last question unfinished, looking into the faces of her husband and her son for the answers.

"The swine wouldn't give it up and Dad brought it at the sale in the Andrews Gallery," Max blurted out. "Good thing, too. How could you ever have let that bounder paint you, Mother? How could you stand it to pose for him—like that?"

She moved closer to the fire, shivering. Her face was very white.

"Is that what you thought, Arnold?" she said.

His lips were grim as he pulled the canvas a little nearer and the flames began to caress the lovely arms that rested on the painted

window-sill. "No, my dearest," he said shakily. "I know the beast did it from memory. He told Clancy so. I tried to get it then, but he died—insolvent—and I had to wait until the creditors——"

"You tried to get it, Arnold? When?" Her voice was low but every word came to me distinctly. I couldn't have gone away then if I would, for my legs would have absolutely refused to carry me.

"That night. The night he was drowned." The man spoke like one in a dream. "I was angry enough to kill him, and I might have if I'd seen him. But I didn't, Louise. Upon my word of honour. I'm glad he's dead, though. Glad. Glad. Now he can't blackmail either of us any more!"

He let the picture fall on its face among the flames and ashes and came toward her, his arms outstretched. She looked at him steadily, not moving.

"Blackmail?" she repeated. "Either of *us*? You—and *me*?" She drew in a sharp breath; her dark brows made almost a straight line above her intent shadowed eyes. "I can see what he intended about this old picture that I never knew existed. You believe that, Arnold?"

"Yes. Yes, my darling. I do."

"He knew you'd pay a big price rather than have it shown?"

"Yes. He wasn't satisfied with holding you up, but——"

She cut in swiftly. "Arnold! I don't understand. Holding me up for money? For——" She paused. A light seemed to break. "Oh! Because of my jewels—— You guessed that I—— You thought that Don Goodhue had some hold and was extorting money." She went to him then and put a hand on his arm. "Oh, my dear, how horrible! What a fool I've been! It wasn't like that at all! I wanted to tell you about it but I was afraid. You used to be so jealous of poor Reggie Star and he needed the money terribly! I was so happy—happy with you—and I had so much. You gave me so much more than ever I could need or use. And I didn't want to hurt you, my dear, my dear.

"But, Reggie was ill. An operation was his only chance. I forced him to take the things and pawn them. I knew he'd never be recognized, for he's one of the best make-up artists I ever saw. I thought I was being very, very clever and that no one would suffer. There wouldn't be even much of a money loss. One can't borrow anything like what things are worth and Reggie would take only just what he was going to need. He met me at Lord and Taylor's and gave me back the pawntickets in a plain envelope. I slipped them under our door when I got back. It ought to have worked and if you hadn't called in Peter Clancy, I never thought of that and I see now it was a horrid, crazy thing to do."

"And quite unnecessary." He took her in his arms. "Everything I have is freely yours, my darling."

"I know that, Arnold." She lifted her tear-stained face. "I never thought you'd mind the money, but I was afraid you might

think there was more between Reggie and me than there ever was or could be. I was afraid you couldn't realize how necessary it is for old troupers to stand by each other."

"I've been much more foolish than you, my dear," he said softly. "But it's all past and gone. Nothing in life can really hurt us if we love one another."

Max leaned over and pressed the last corner of the picture down into the glowing coals. When it was entirely consumed, his slack young body straightened, he threw back his shoulders and with lifted head went over to his mother, drew her hand through his arm and the three, united once more, moved quietly off together down the long road home.

I had slipped back into the shelter of the trees. I don't think Max and his father ever knew I was there and Louise must have forgotten. . . . I made my way back to the boat as well as I could with my foolish eyes full of tears. It wasn't so much Louise and Arnold that affected me, though that was enough, but the change in that boy as he watched the little drama played out was touching beyond words to express. All the peevishness of late adolescence seemed to fall from his shoulders, and when he left the scene of his parent's trial and triumph he was a man.

I wrote all this to Peter that night while it was fresh and vital in my mind; reams of pages. It was not until I had it all out of my system that I harked back to my first intention and recounted the incident of Tom's dangerous accident, my own amateur sleuthing, Doctor Overton's reaction to my suspicions and Tom's as well.

With my mind turned back toward tragic and near-tragic happenings, the glow of that afternoon's reconciliation began to dim. . . . After all, I considered, at the time of Goodhue's dreadful death, Arnold Enfield was firmly convinced that the painter was guilty of having destroyed Louise's peace of mind even as his own was being threatened. His denial to her that he had seen Goodhue that fatal winter night sounded convincing enough, but the motive still persisted in haunting my mind and I concluded my letter to Peter in these words :

I have now cleared up the little matter of the phony jewel robbery for you, and the cause thereof and I hope you are interested and grateful. In return, tell me honestly whether you think I'm a nut to feel that the repercussions of Donald Goodhue's death aren't over. I came up here on an impulse, partly on account of the fishing, but also because I had the temerity to want to see if I could, by hook or crook, dig out the remaining crucial facts of your unfinished story and pin the badge of guilt where it belongs. I dreamed of finding out more about Giles Landless, but in that direction as well as all the others I've drawn a complete blank. Mary misses the hermit in her kind whimsical way, Jared thinks they're well rid of him, Doctor Overton professes to know

nothing, the Enfields are really uninterested or appear so. And yet, somehow, Peter, I can't get Landless out of my mind. He couldn't be somewhere not far off in the woods, could he? They say he knew how to keep out of the way and used at times to be seen at places amazingly far apart; that he could maintain himself in the woods for indefinite periods——

I had such lovely visits here with the Nortons. I can't bear to have it all spoiled but now it seems haunted. Tell me if you can think of any way I can help in exorcising Goodhue's ghost. I'm like the Christian Scientist that sat on a pin: "I don't like what I fancy I feel."

We're going on a picnic to-morrow. Maybe that will cheer me up. So long, Pal. Blessings and everything.

ZINNIA.

I sealed the envelope and directed it to Peter's New York office with the words "Please Forward" in red ink and underscored. I got an air mail stamp in Fairfield on our way to the picnic that sunny Saturday morning and mailed it there with my own far from fair hands.

CHAPTER XXVIII

IT was a perfect day, bright, warm and sweet with lilac and apple-blossom all the way down to the shore. Mary drove, partly because as Tom said, "she's a better chauffeur than any man in these parts, let alone me with a bad shoulder," but also, I considered, because it gave the two young people a chance to sit together on the back seat, which Mary evidently thought was a good idea, even though either Louise or I must make a third.

When we reached the lovely lonely curving beach we all went in for a dip, though the water was cold; all but Mary who stayed to keep up the driftwood fire Tom had started and to make the coffee and heat the baked beans in the fat brown earthen pot.

By the time the lunch was ready we were even more so. There was cold fried chicken besides, and a green salad, with pie, cookies, crullers and cake to finish off and be finished off with if we had had the courage to cope with them all.

After it was all cleared up and the remains (which reminded one of the miracle of the loaves and fishes, there seemed so much more to dispose of than when we started) had been packed in the car, Tom and Connie went in again and when they came out ran races like children on the hard wet sand left by the receding tide, while we loafed in the sun, and Mary tried to smoke a cigarette with no conspicuous success but without casualties. She said she'd always wanted to cultivate some easy vice but guessed her old Puritan blood wouldn't let her enjoy it and she might as well be good, if it was boring at times. She choked and laughed and threw away the stump of the cigarette. Unfortunately she chucked it carelessly to windward

and, without any of us noticing, it blew back into the rim of her old straw hat. The first thing we knew, she had snatched it off and was dancing on it.

"Now I've *got* to have a new one," she said grinning joyously, "but don't none of you tell how it come to be ruined!"

I had never seen Mary Rolf so happy before, not even in the old days. Just looking at Tom and Connie skipping stones and cheering each other on seemed to fill her with bright visions that blotted out, for the time being, every anxious, troubled or apprehensive thought.

It was with evidently great reluctance that she roused herself from that happy contemplation. "Come, children," she called. "Time to start for home. The tide has turned."

The inevitable tide! It had turned indeed. Clouds were forming on the horizon, though the sun still shone when we got to the narrow branch road with the big sign advertising the wonders of Mary's uncle's young but growing Desert in the heart of Maine.

"I've got to see it and it's really not too late," Louise pleaded. "That storm is going to blow off. I know it. We've passed here a million times more or less, but Arnold or I have engagements or something. We're always going to stop the next time, but like to-morrow it never comes. Please, Mary!"

"O.K." Mary agreed cheerfully. "I guess you're right about the storm. Maybe it's only wind anyway. Connie said she hadn't seen the place, nor you, Miss Zin. It's an old story to Tom and me in a way, but it builds so fast seems like it's always kinda different. We got time enough if, when we get back to the Corners, you don't mind my driving you in to the farm first, Louise, so's to get your evening milk to deliver when I take you around home."

That was perfectly satisfactory and we turned in on the fairly smooth dirt road. It must have been less than a mile before we came to the little house where Mary's uncle lived all alone. I insisted on paying the small fee for all of us, which pleased him mightily and he gave us the "freedom of the city"—and what a fantastic "city" it was—and is. Sand! Bottomless sand, blowing, whispering, drifting like grey sleet at the will of the south wind. Here was a great twisted cedar, bare, grey and gaunt with one extended arm like a gibbet close at the edge of the place where the road faded away into trackless billows of sand. There was the almost submerged roof of a barn and a silo beside it, able only to keep its pointed helmet above the shifting surge. It was one of the most hopelessly sinister sights I had ever beheld. A bit of Max Enfield's dissertation to Peter on the subject came back to me: something about the human tide being like these awful sands. But I put it hastily from me. Human beings, in spite of the horrible interims of war, are creative, while here was nothing but destruction.

"I've seen enough," Louise said sharply. "Haven't you, Zingara? Connie?"

Even Mary's face looked grim. "You see that big mound?" she pointed. "Well, Uncle Joe says it's grown six feet higher within a year. The whole roof of the barn was under last summer and by fall the sand had shifted somewhere else. They say there's a thousand acres of it now but I'd pity anybody that went over 'em to measure it."

We had walked in only a little way, but I had already sunk in over the tops of my sport shoes. With one accord we turned back and, reaching solid ground, sat on the running board and dumped out the sand.

Mary backed the car and turned it with admirable skill in the narrow road. I got first into the rear seat, Connie followed, then Tom, after Louise had joined Mary in front. We stopped for a minute to say "Good-bye" to the hardy old ex-farmer, who looked as gnarled, grey and tough as the dead trees, though he was very much alive and evidently extremely fond of his niece.

"Seems a pity to leave him there all alone, year in and year out," she said as we drove away. "But he doesn't mind. 'No interferin' neighbours,' he says, and as long as he cleans house and pleases his own conscience, there ain't no one to butt in and tell him different."

Mary rambled on in a pleasant monologue. The rest of us were full of sun, fresh air and food and talked but little. The sun slid slowly down the sky and made a glory of the clouds above the far purple hills. Already the moon was rising, a perfect circle of shining silver, in the rose of the after-glow.

I saw Connie lift her small strong hand and, as if by compulsion, place it firmly on the back of Tom's brown one, which turned swiftly to receive it.

After that I was content to observe the passing scenery from my own side of the car . . . noting with an odd stirring of the heart that there seemed to be quite a bit more room for me on the back seat.

It was rather late before Mary got back from delivering the milk, and though Tom and Connie and I helped set out the supper, Jared was more perverse and disgruntled than ever I had seen him before and that was saying something. However, it seemed to make no impression on anyone but me. Mary's bright black eyes watched covertly and delightedly the two young people busily washing and drying dishes at the sink, while she put away the food and I the dishes and Jared gloomed at us all from across the depleted table.

He didn't say anything and I tried to tell myself that there was nothing more suggestive than usual in the way his small shadowed eyes followed Connie about. I felt sure he had always resented his stepson from the first, had accepted him only because he couldn't get Mary otherwise, and had made a hideous fuss when Tom, with his mother's secret connivance, had run away to school in Portland. After his return Tom had proved practically indispensable at the farm, remaining there, on his part, for the purpose of softening his mother's

hard lot, and tolerated by Jared because he came cheap and the farm couldn't well be worked without him.

Surely there was no gratitude for all Tom's capable and willing help in Jared's face as his dour sullen glance followed the two young people about. It was late for country folk when everything was finished and tidied up. Tom thought he was well enough to get back to his own little house that night and left soon after. He said a general "Good-night," kissed his mother and, turning at the door, caught Connie's eyes with a glance that was a caress and a summons. Without hesitation she joined him at the door. I saw his arm close about her as she shut it behind them.

And, mingling with the metallic fall of the old latch, I heard a queer almost animal sound and turning saw Jared rise to his feet, his face dark with anger. With three strides he reached the door, flung it open and stepped out into the night.

"Jared!" There was a tone in Mary's voice that I had never heard before. "Jared!" she called again and, leaning sideways, as if by instinct, she caught up the iron poker from its hook.

Moving with surprising rapidity, she ran across the kitchen and out of the door. I followed, breathless and horribly disturbed. There is nothing more terrifying than humanity, seen suddenly in the raw.

But nothing happened. Jared turned at the sound of Mary's voice, glared at her for an instant and then recovered himself. "Whatcha doing with that there poker?" he asked roughly, with a hard grin. "Don't you like to see love-birds bill and coo? Or are you afraid it won't stop there? Anyhow, here they come back and you won't hev to take the poker to neither of 'em!"

His voice dropped on the last sentence and with a sneer he passed us and went on out to the barn.

"What was it? What's the matter, Mum?" Tom spoke as soon as he was near enough. His arm was still around Connie and they both looked as if only partly wakened from a beautiful dream.

"Nothing." Mary's return to her usual manner was startling to me, it was so swift and so complete. The hand holding the poker was hidden in the folds of her ample apron. "Jared's got one of his puritanical tantrums on. Sometimes, you know, he's so virtuous he thinks he's the only one. But don't worry. I can always pacify him. Come on in, Connie, dear. Tom ought to be getting along home now. It's late."

"Maybe I'd better stay here another night," Tom said quickly and, I thought, hopefully.

"There's no need to." Mary's voice was quiet and firm. "You can sleep later if you don't hear me pounding around in the morning. I wish cows knew when it comes Sunday and would put off milking time a coupla hours so I could get a rest like city folks." She turned with her free arm around Connie's waist. "Good-night, son," she called over her shoulder.

"Good night, Mum. Take care of my girl," he called back joyously.

Mary's hearty voice deepened. "Never fear. I'll take care of her," she said with a tenderness and strength that almost brought the tears to my eyes.

I felt oppressed and lonely as I made my solitary way to my cabin down the well-worn path, sending the broad bright beam of my flashlight scouting ahead. After I had passed the newly shingled hay barn I looked back and saw Jared entering the house by the still brightly lighted kitchen, and I paused to wonder what, if anything, would happen when he closed the door. Had the two women already gone upstairs? Was Jared over his tantrum? His "puritanical tantrum" Mary had called it. . . . Was that what ailed him—some sort of inverted religious feeling? I certainly had never been impressed by his piety. He wasn't a church-goer and his language at times was enough to frighten a mule skinner to death. I knew, however, that that didn't absolutely preclude such an hypothesis; at the same time I couldn't help feeling that Jared's trouble was something quite different, and deep in my heart I believed that Mary was well aware of it, and that she was sternly preparing, in her capable, courageous and wholly self-reliant way, to cope with whatever emergency might arise.

Thinking thus, I moved on through the haunted moonlight and turning off the path that went on down to the lake, I entered a little grove of spangled white birch and pine and was soon on my own doorstep. The wind was dying down and through an opening in the trees below the rough bit of untended lawn the lake lay fair and serene in the pale eerie light.

As I turned away a shadow slipped noiselessly across the path of the moon; a boat—canoe perhaps . . . there was no sound of oars. Someone from the other side, hardly fishing so late as this . . . Doctor Overton possibly. He had his own queer ideas about fishing and other things. . . .

It couldn't be—— No! there are no such things as ghosts, earth-bound to the scene of their last living glimpse of earth and sky. "You're getting fanciful in your old age, Zingara Hartley," I said half aloud. "For heaven's sake, brace up and have some style about you!"

But I went to sleep wondering where Peter Clancy was and when he would get my letter . . . and whether, in the circumstances, I would be justified in bothering him again.

CHAPTER XXIX

I FELT much better in the morning. It was a lovely day; very warm for that season of the year. The air was so still that I could

hear the light clink-clank of a cowbell away over in the hill pasture as I went up to breakfast. We had codfish cakes and bacon, I remember, hot raised biscuits, coffee, crullers—and for those rugged New Englanders who could bear the thought—pie!

Jared was loud and genial at breakfast and ate a great deal. He growled a little when Tom came in late, but he wasn't really unpleasant and lingered in the kitchen to discuss some work on a boat he was anxious for Tom to finish repairing for the Russells before they came up to stay.

"They'll be here, come Tuesday, so you'd better get at it soon's you're through eating," he finished peremptorily.

Tom looked as if nothing in heaven or earth could upset him. "There's not more than a day's work left to do," he returned cheerfully. "This is Sunday. Remember? But don't worry. I'll have it ready to go in the water Monday night."

"Well, see that you do!" Jared turned abruptly and went out of the kitchen, slamming the door behind him.

I wrote letters on my own little cabin porch all that long beautiful Sunday afternoon and saw no one except the people at the farm at meal times. Tom and Connie weren't there for midday dinner. I started to ask Mary where they'd gone, but she only smiled and shook her head. Afterward, when we were alone and I was lending a hand with the dishes, she opened up.

"I don't know where they've gone," she murmured happily. "I fixed them some eats and they went off in Tom's little Ford. Guess they won't go far on account of the gas. Wouldn't be a bit surprised if they was to Tom's place right now, looking over the paper samples he hasn't been ready to decide on." She pushed back a lock of hair off her forehead with the back of a warm wet hand and winked one bright black eye. "Did I know what he was a-waiting for? And why he wouldn't take my say-so about the patterns for the walls of a single derned room in his house? Just ask me, Miss Zin! And isn't he the cagey lad, after all's said and done? My Tom! Patient and steady and kind. Waiting for Connie to get over whatever it was she felt about that banshee, Goodhue. And she's over it now, my dear; good and over it—and for good and all! Tom hasn't pestered her at all, but she musta known. 'Way back in the winter I seen how Tom felt, and Connie's no fool. Yesterday I was pretty sure she was making up her mind, and I guess there wasn't many words necessary between them—and there won't never be."

I thought that was true; even prayed, in my unorthodox way that no earth-born cloud would ever arise to darken the bright promise of their love and trust.

That Sunday the sky was a bright intense blue. Monday dawned fair with a rising southerly wind.

"Wind from the south, blow the bait in the fish's mouth!" I quoted aloud to myself as I came back after breakfast to my little

cabin. I stopped on the porch to identify the sound of Tom's hammer and saw, already going strong on the repairs for the Russells' boat, that Jared would, undoubtedly, be paid well for and Tom as little as his stepfather could get by with.

Tom doesn't need much money to make him a happy man, I thought, settling down to a neglected job of writing Bill Gorham had asked me to do for him. And all through the morning at intervals, the faint cheerful sound of good honest work being diligently and skilfully accomplished, kept company with the clatter of my typewriter and made me stick manfully to my own last until the short "profile" of a celebrity, whom I had once interviewed and who again had come into the news, was ready to mail.

I went out to the road after lunch and waited for the R.F.D. postman who came along almost immediately. There was no letter from Peter. I decided I had no right to expect one, that I was lucky to have been able to get my story off to Bill so soon, and that I was a free woman again and could go off to see if the old adage about the south wind was true.

I telephoned across to Louise Enfield, but she had lately become involved in small garments for Max's recently announced little going-to-be; she had Eugenia there for the afternoon and they had *work* to do.

So I decided to go out alone in the boat I rented and kept at Jared's landing, since there wasn't a very good place to leave one in front of my cabin for any length of time, on account of some sunken rocks and in case of a blow.

I stopped a minute at the old boat-house to exchange greetings and inspect Tom's fine clean handiwork before I pushed off. At first there wasn't any other boat on the lake, but late in the afternoon, just before I came in, I saw Doctor Overton casting and drifting and casting again; a dark lonely figure silhouetted against the bright emerald bushes at the edge of the home pasture.

The wind had risen a good deal by that time and I was delighted with the length of cast I was able to get out, so long as I fished in the same direction. There seemed to be a little something in the old saw after all, for my catch was a good one for a single rod. Five nice trout, ten inches and over, that had put up a swell fight, two big pickerel and a lot of pretty little frying-size perch. I was quite stuck up when I called to Tom to come out and look at them in the live-car in the middle of the boat.

"Will you take them up to your mother when you go?" I suggested. "Maybe she'd like the trout for supper."

"She sure will if there's time enough when she gets back from taking the milk over to Enfield's," he returned with a delightful grin. "You certainly are some sport, Miss Zin. I've got quite a little more to do before I go up but I'll hurry along. Or if Jared comes in earlier, I'll send them up by him. I'll bet he hasn't had your luck."

"Has Jared been fishing this afternoon?" I don't know why the

thought gave me such a queasy, uneasy feeling. I hadn't seen him—but the shores of Kearsarge curve in and out—I had been intent on my own sport of which there had been plenty. . . . If he had gone around the bend to the south while I was fishing the north end. . . .

"Yes, he went out a couple of hours or so ago, I believe it was." Tom answered my question promptly and with no surprise.

I thought I was getting jumpy over nothing but on an uncontrollable impulse I asked, "What time does Connie usually get home from school ?" I said it casually and realized by Tom's manner that he could hardly have seen any connection between the two questions.

"Oh, I guess she'll be back soon now." His smile was eloquent. "That's why I'm in such a hurry to finish. Miss Zin, you know, don't you, that I'm the luckiest man alive ?"

"I think you are—at least one of them, Tom." I held out my hand and he took it and shook it hard. "I congratulate you both with all my heart. I hope the wedding's to be while I'm still here."

"I hope so too," he said eagerly, "but Connie won't break her teaching contract, of course. She's promised as soon as it's over; that will be sometime early in July. I'll have the house completely ready for her by then. Naturally I didn't want to ask her before to pick out her wallpaper. Looked like taking too much for granted."

"But you knew a long time ago, Tom."

"Yes," he said looking past me into the future which, for him, held no cloud, "the minute I saw her, I knew she was the One."

He made the statement so frankly and with such a touching kind of reverent joy, that I just gave his arm a squeeze and turned away with a lump in my throat.

The rather steep slanting path from the landing to my little old cabin is a short one. I could hear the renewed taps of Tom's hammer but faintly, however, for the wind was rising and blowing in his direction. I thought as I changed out of my fishing clothes that I'd better take rubbers and things along when I went up to supper.

The windows of my little bedroom face the south and it wasn't until I was ready to start and stepped out on the porch that I was aware of big clouds piling up, strong and black, where they met the swiftly flowing heated air. We often had thunderstorms, I was perfectly accustomed to them and had never been in the least frightened before. Even now I don't think the ominous appearance of the sky had much to do with the sharp inward shrinking of my whole being at that first lightning flash; instantaneous and harmless though it was, it showed me something that, otherwise, I would have entirely missed. I stood transfixed until the far distant answering roll of thunder brought me back to sane deliberation.

There was a boat tied up under the low hanging branches of a tree below the bank at the edge of my clearing. And the boat was empty. Well, what of that ? It was a good enough place to land and there weren't so many easy ones around the shores of the lake. There were plenty of innocent reasons why a person might want to

come ashore. . . . But I had seen no one out on the lake except Doctor Overton. . . . He, or anyone else, could have landed while I was dressing without my seeing him, or——

An irresistible impulse drew me, swift and silent, down to the edge of the water. By bending low I could see the inside of the boat. There was one rod extending out over the stern, the line partly reeled in and a small green frog, dead, with its tiny hands clasped around the hook that pierced its jaw lay in the dirty water on the bottom planks.

One look at the tackle box and the various gadgets lying about was enough. I straightened up. I knew then that it wasn't the cramped position that made my knees shake.

It was Jared's tackle—Jared's boat. . . .

How long had it been there? Why had he landed here instead of at his own more accessible place, such a little way farther along the shore? Why was his boat lying so close under the bank in the thick shadow of the trees?

There might be a dozen good explanations but I couldn't think of any, not *good* ones. It wasn't time yet, quite, for Mary to be back from the Enfields. Connie would be alone, as she must have been many times before, I told my beating heart; but it was no use. I don't know what awful pictures burned hot behind my eyes, and all at once I began to run.

I crossed the open glade where the cabin stood and entered the narrow woodland path that would shortly bring me into the curving lane leading from the shore directly up to the farm; longer but much quicker than tearing blindly up through the woods.

I was in a panic. My only thought was to get to the farmhouse, to get there quickly, before——

All at once I stopped short, listening as well as I could with the blood pounding in my ears. Was that Jared's voice? Surely. . . .

I couldn't see anyone yet. The thicket of low sweeping firs and birches hid the main path. Shaken by the suddenness of relief I crept forward on tiptoe, peering ahead.

It was Jared. I knew that angry low growl, though I couldn't at first distinguish any words. Then I heard Tom answer something in his usual calm voice. I was near enough by that time to catch the sound of his footsteps and the clink of a pail against a rock. I knew by that just where he was. There was only one place, where the narrow lane turns and the big boulders lie close on the right. Tom would be taking my fish up to his mother. She would be home by now. The storm was bringing the dark early. I must go back and get my mackintosh and——

I had reached the very edge of the thicket and was about to turn back when I heard a queer inhuman noise followed by an awful thud, a crash and the sound of a metal bucket rolling downhill over stones.

I felt stunned, but for a second only. My paralysed muscles sprang quickly to life. I dashed into the lane, saw the pail lying on its side, the shining wet bodies of fish slithered down amongst the stones and beyond the great shoulder of rock, a few paces above, the figure of Jared Rolf, crouched, dark and menacing, glaring down at me.

For a brief instant everything was breathless, still. I saw wet red spots on the leaves but Tom wasn't there. I looked wildly about, saw Jared hurl the axe he had been carrying far off into the bushes and begin to creep toward me with outstretched naked hands.

The awful spell broke and I screamed and screamed and screamed again.

CHAPTER XXX

"COMING! Where are you? Zinnia!"

It was Peter's voice. Miraculous. Strong and confident, it swept up toward me on the wind.

The hideous clutching hands at my throat let go their hold, a powerful arm thrust me aside down on the rocky track, and Jared sprang like a great ugly wild creature, up and away!

"Zinnia!" The shout was close now. I could hear the thud of running feet coming from below and Peter burst upon me from around the great boulder. "Good God," he cried. "Zinnia! Are you hurt?"

"No!" I groaned as I pushed him back and struggled to my knees. "It's Tom! Tom Burton. He was here. Murdered. . . ."

I was hardly coherent but Peter understood. He lifted me with one arm while with the other he motioned to Wiggar who had followed close. "Look there." He pointed to the red drops on the hanging leaves at the edge of the tall rock. "Must have been dragged off the path. Search until you find——"

"Is she all right?" Doctor Overton cut in. He was just there. I didn't see him come, nor the other man, tall and slim, with a face I had never seen before, except, perhaps, in dreams.

"I don't think she's hurt," Peter answered, looking closely into my dazed eyes. "You aren't, are you, Zinnia?"

"No. No," I cried. "But Tom——"

"We'll see. He can't be far." The doctor turned swiftly and pushed after Wiggar in under the drooping trees. The stranger hesitated for an instant then turned and slipped silently after the other two.

Peter caught me almost roughly by the arms. "It was Jared Rolf," he said, his steady gaze fixed hard upon me. "Did it happen just now? Which way did he go?"

"To the farm." My breath came short. "Oh, Peter! What will he do to them, to anyone who stands in his way?"

He gave me one look. "Stay here," he ordered pushing past me. I saw the dull flash of an automatic in his hand as he sped up the hill.

And I after him. What had happened to Tom—had happened. He was in the best of hands. I could do nothing here, but up there at the farm—— I believed Jared had gone berserk. I thought of the two women, helpless before his fury. . . . If they tried to stop him——

I don't know how I got to the farmyard gate. It was open, and across the grassy meadow I saw Peter already at the kitchen door. The light was failing swiftly and it wasn't until I was almost there that I realized he was talking to someone and talking fast.

"She says there's no car here but yours, Zinnia." He turned at the sound of my running feet, apparently not surprised that I was there. "I've got to have it. Quick! Your keys!"

I caught a glimpse of Connie's white face. There was no time to speak. "Out there," I said, pointing to the shed. "Hidden. I'll have to show you."

Together we raced across the grass. I fumbled in the niche behind a beam and brought out my car keys. He wanted to take them, but I slid into the driver's seat before he realized my intention. "I'm taking you out to the main road, Peter," I said decisively. "There are three forks before you get there and you couldn't tell which to take." I was already backing and turning the car.

Peter uttered a sharp word under his breath as he jumped in beside me. "The girl heard something," he said, as we sped out of the yard. "Thinks they're going to Portland."

"They?" I was confused, stupid with horror and anxiety.

"She didn't know what it was all about," Peter said jerkily, "and I didn't tell her."

"Connie?"

"Yes. No time, and better so." His voice was harsh as the wind in the bending tree tops. "She heard Mary Rolf drive in. Looked out and saw her turning ready to back the car into the shed when Jared came out of the woods on the dead run and jumped in. He yelled something about Portland and a boat. Mary started the car and didn't even turn her head when Connie called from the kitchen door. The girl's worried sick. I only dared to tell her that we'd catch up with them in case there was something wrong. She knew there was. God help her!"

"God help us all," I echoed.

"They can't have much of a start," Peter muttered half-aloud. "I wish I knew—— How did he force her to help him escape, Zinnia? Did he have a gun?"

"Not that I know of, except a shot gun. What he used down there was an axe." I shuddered but kept the car moving at top speed.

"Would she willingly try to help him get away, do you think?"

"Not if she knew it was Tom." I was certain.

"But how would she know that ?"

"I think she might guess, Peter. She's very keen."

"Then—" he hesitated. "I don't see why he didn't throw her or get her out of the car. Why did he risk taking his wife, or anyone along ?"

He's always had a blind spot for motors. Gets mixed on the steering because he was brought up on sail boats—rudders, you know." I thought a second. "He always carries a fishing knife. You've seen the kind. Long sharp pointed blade; a spring; you can open it with one hand. . . . And he knows Mary drives better and faster than most men." My foot went down hard on the accelerator. The car bumped and swayed past the second fork.

"You're not too bad yourself, darling," he murmured. "Will you recognize their car if we don't catch it before they get to the main road ?"

"We'll see it before then, with any luck," I exclaimed through clenched teeth.

"Don't lose your nerve, Zinnia," Peter warned hastily. "He won't touch her, at least until he feels safe. It would be too dangerous for him."

"I know. But when——"

"Probably not until they get into the outskirts of Portland and that's a long way ahead, my dear. Now, slow down a second and let me drive. You can tell me which way to go."

"No, Peter !" I cried desperately. "I can get more speed out of Henry than you or anyone else. He knows me. This is the best he can do. Look at the speedometer. And there's no time to stop."

As I spoke we passed the third fork and came into the long straight-away that at length joins the main stem. Far ahead, and hanging low toward the ground were two tiny bobbing specks of red.

We had come out of the woods and the wind struck with full force. The sky was black but there was, as yet, no rain.

"Will Mary recognize the sound of your horn ?" Peter reached out his hand. I nodded and a long call went out through the thickening dusk. Henry has a voice quite his own. I wondered desperately if Jared would know it too.

There was no other car ahead of us on the lonely country road. It was too far away to be recognizable but I felt sure it could be no other than the one we sought. We were gaining already when it was necessary for it to slow at the four corners of the little hamlet of Abbotsville. That didn't help much, for we also were obliged in turn to slacken speed, and another car got in between, going in the same direction. Fortunately it was a light grey paint job, not to be confused with the black of our quarry.

Out of the village we sped through the windswept dusk and passed the grey car as if it were standing still. My great hope was that

Mary would run out of gas. I knew I had plenty, for I had cashed in three coupons and had hardly driven at all since.

"We're doing better than they are." Peter was breathing fast. "You watch the road, Zinnia. I've got my eye on them."

I tried to do both and succeeded fairly well. Something was happening to check their speed, for we were climbing up, hand over hand. I had to watch out for a string of passing trucks and when I could look down the road again, they had entirely disappeared.

"Gone away!" Peter exclaimed, under his breath. "Damn it!"

I went on fast a little way and then began to slow down. Deep shadows under great trees that sparsely lined the road might harbour a car, if the lights were out. . . . And what would happen to Mary? My heart beat with dreadful foreboding.

"Look," Peter called suddenly. "There's an entering road. Perhaps——"

I had seen it and the sign. "Maine Desert, 25 cents to see——" Quick as a flash I swung the car lamps inward, and there, lying close on the left side of the narrow track was a bright empty quart can lying on its side: the kind Mary took over cream in at night and brought back empty——

"This is right," I said between my teeth. "She meant us to know." The car jolted as I turned too short but righted itself and we ran on, slower now, for the darkness had shut down like a lid and the wind through the open window stung like sleet. But still no rain.

"You're sure, Zinnia?" Peter's worried voice sounded close in my ear. "What made them come this way?"

I shook my head. I couldn't explain, but I felt that somehow Mary had got the upper hand. What she had done here was done consciously and for a purpose of her own. The constriction in my throat was hardly lessened, however, for I sensed awful trouble ahead and Peter did too; his automatic was out again and he said urgently for me to go as fast as I possibly could.

It seemed as though it couldn't have been more than a couple of minutes when we passed Uncle Joe's house without stopping, for the fresh marks of tyres showed up in my headlight glare going straight on.

"There they are," Peter whispered, though he might have shouted without their hearing in the tumult of rushing air.

Suddenly a blast of blowing sand struck the other side of my car. At the same instant there came to our straining ears a hideous crashing sound and I saw, ahead, the ghostly grey tree at the edge of the dim track, stretching its gibbet-like arm above the dark bulk of a car, crushed against its foot.

I don't know now whether it was Peter or I who was first in the road, but he reached the wreck a second ahead and had torn open the door. I saw Mary sitting very quiet, her hands still clasping the wheel. The opposite door hung open on its hinges.

There was no one else in the car.

"Mary!" I grasped her arm. "Mary! Are you hurt?"

She moved then, turned her head and looked at me. "It was Tom," she said thickly. "The blood on his hand; it was Tom's. Tell me the truth."

I bowed my head. She leaned back and pushed the damp hair from her forehead with the back of her strong steady hand.

"Where is *he?*" Peter pressed forward urgently. "When did he get away?"

Mary showed no surprise at seeing Peter there. "Just now. When we crashed. He crawled off I think." She stepped out of the car and called, "Jared! Jared, are you there?"

No answer except the wind that dashed the sand, stinging, blinding, in our faces.

"You didn't see which way he went?" Peter dragged a small flashlight from his pocket. The tiny beam searched hither and yon but it could penetrate only a little way into the whirling darkness.

"Get her into your car," Peter said to me. "Make sure she isn't hurt. He can't have gone far. I'll have a try——"

"I have a bigger flash than that. In the glove compartment," I said hurriedly. "Don't take too many chances, Peter, for God's sake. He's not worth it. We can broadcast an alarm. He can't possibly get away." We had to shelter in the lee of the wrecked car to make our voices carry.

"He may be hurt, Zinnia." Peter's voice was stern. "A wounded man, crawling off through those awful shifting dunes. I must find him if I can."

He turned hurriedly away. In the sand-threaded glare of my headlights I saw him slip one arm out of his coat and draw it up to protect his face.

Mary must have heard what he said, for as soon as I spoke to her she moved automatically along the obscured road and let me take her hand. Sheltering our faces from the blast, we crept back to my car. The thought of Peter wandering about in the unfeatured darkness appalled me, and as soon as Mary and I were safely inside I switched on all the additional lights to form a sort of beacon to guide him. For us the darkness only crept nearer to the windows but we could still see the ray of the flashlight Peter carried moving from one grey hillock to the next of the interminable crests and hollows.

For minutes that seemed hours Mary Rolf sat in stony silence. Then, quite suddenly, she began to talk in a low steady monotone. I held my breath and listened.

"He came running to the car with blood on him and a knife in his hands. 'Get going, or I'll kill you, too,' he said and jumped in. I saw he was crazy mad. Connie came to the door and called. The only thing for me was to do as he said. To get him away from there. What happened to me didn't matter so much.

"I drove out of the yard as fast as I could, so she wouldn't realize

what was going on. He yelled at me, something about Portland and a ship, and to drive faster—faster——

"After a while he quieted down a little, but he still had his big fishing knife open, threatening to cut my heart out if I tried to go off the road or slow down or make a noise. I didn't care for myself, but I wanted to make sure what he had done. I knew if it wasn't Tom it was you. No one else down that way, and he hates you almost as much.

"I said, 'Jared, why did you murder Miss Zingara Hartley?' He just threw back his head and laughed as if it was a great joke. 'Don't you wish it was her?' he said. 'But no,' he said, 'you ain't fooling me nor yourself neither. You know well enough what's been going on.' And then he turned all wild and sickening horrible, and he said, 'I'll kill any Goddam' son of the devil that thinks he's going to get that girl for himself; that skunk Goodhue and your mealy-mouthed son are gone, and when I'm through with you, I'll go back some day. . . .'"

The awful slow methodical voice ceased. Then the rain struck like a wall of water. I saw the wavering beam of the flashlight and Peter came staggering back.

CHAPTER XXXI

WET and white as that of a drowned man, Peter's face appeared at the car window.

"Get in! Quick!" I called, running down the glass an inch, for all the rain and wind and sand were striking from the other side.

He put his mouth close to the crack. "There's a house with lights not far down there," he shouted. "Don't try to turn, but back straight. I'll throw a light on the edge to guide you. Get going. Easy, now. That does it."

He hung on to the running board and we rolled safely back. I had been through a New England hurricane not so long before. This was bad but not as awful as that had been. Mary didn't move or seem to notice what was happening. Even after we got her into her uncle's warm kitchen, she could only stare blankly ahead, her eyes fixed on nothingness.

The old man took us in, saw to our comfort but asked no questions except with his bright keen little faded eyes. There was time only for the briefest explanation.

"Any trace, Peter?" I whispered.

"No." There was wet sand in his hair and in the drowned soft felt hat that he threw over into the wood box. He bent to speak in the old man's ready ear. After a few whispered words Peter went over to the corner where an old-fashioned telephone hung from the wall. He called the operator in a low tone. Mary seemed not to

notice, but after "long distance" answered I heard enough to be sure he was getting the farmhouse on the wire, instead of the police.

It seemed a long time before the call was completed. Mary sank deeper in a lethargy bordering on coma. I felt helpless, frightened, yet I hesitated to try to call her back.

Suddenly Peter's weary body tautened. He spoke into the transmitter so low that I could hardly catch a word. He listened, said "Yes," once breathlessly and listened again. Then in a flash his whole expression changed. The dreadful strain left his eyes, and with the receiver pressed against his ear he beckoned to me.

"Here's Miss Hartley. Tell her." He spoke into the mouthpiece and motioned me to take over. "Be careful," he whispered and stood by, one strong hand on my shoulder.

"Miss Hartley?" I heard a quiet voice. "Doctor Overton speaking. We found Tom a few minutes after. He was unconscious but alive. A good deal of bleeding from a wound at the back of the skull. It must have been a glancing blow. Concussion, but no fracture, I'm confident. We've staunched the bleeding and I've dressed the wound. He's resting quietly and should do well from now on, for he has a most devoted and capable nurse."

Peter caught the receiver as it fell from my hand. The atmosphere in the room seemed suddenly electrified but not from the storm without. It was another force, one that we still know little about, that, without a word from either of us, brought Mary out of a stupor and lifted her to her feet.

"Tom! That was Tom!" she cried. "Oh, God, in Thine infinite mercy——" Her breath caught in her throat.

"He's alive, Mary!" I clasped her trembling hands and held them close. "Hurt but not injured. Do you understand? Doctor Overton is with him—and Connie. He's going to be all right. The doctor's sure. Certain."

She sank slowly to the couch. Her face was pale as death. "But Jared tried to murder him," she whispered hoarsely. "He did kill Donald Goodhue. That's what he meant to tell me in the car. Jared was a murderer——"

She looked up at Peter, seeming to sense his presence for the first time, and repeated the last awful accusation but with a strange frightened upward inflection. "Jared—was—a murderer?"

"Yes," Peter answered distinctly. "He killed Goodhue, and set fire to Landless's cabin hoping to burn the hermit in his sleep. I suspected it long ago, and now we have the proof, if we ever need to use it."

"If you ever need to use it," Mary repeated heavily and lifted her eyes to meet those of her staunch old kinsman fixed upon her.

"So you suspected Jared from the first, Peter. Even down there in Florida?" I spoke accusingly but held my voice down to little more than a whisper, for Mary was in the next room lying on the

couch, her uncle sitting beside her, and though the door was closed we could still hear through the storm without and the thin partition within the faint murmur of their voices.

"You don't think that was fair to you, my dear." Peter's smile was somewhat grim. "But suspicion wasn't proof, Zinnia, and I hadn't much to go on, then, except my own estimate of character. You see the killing of Donald Goodhue might have been possible, under certain conditions, to almost any member of the cast, so to say. But if someone deliberately set fire to the hermit's cabin, meaning to silence him for ever, that hideous crime was out of the question for any man but one in the whole set-up."

"Yes," I nodded quickly. "Impossible for Tom, the Enfields—— Doctor Overton——" I added the last name with some degree of hesitation.

"Doctor Overton," Peter repeated. "Don't make any mistake about that man. Had you any idea, Zinnia, that he had been haunting this side of the lake for some time, worrying about you all, especially after Tom's ladder accident ?"

"No, Peter. But now I begin to understand. . . ." I saw again the shape of a boat, floating across a patch of moonlight; the dark figure of the doctor patiently casting along the farmside of the lake where it was shallow and weedy and nothing lurked except pickerel and perch; the expert surgeon's ready and skilful help; and I felt my heart warm with penitence—and hope.

Peter had gone on quickly. "You see," he bent nearer, "up to the time Landless's shack was burned, Overton was convinced that Arnold, Louise or Max had complete knowledge of the manner of Goodhue's death. He wasn't so sure that it was deliberate murder. Rather he imagined it to be a case of more or less criminal negligence. He thought one of them might have run into Goodhue by accident, and failed to give the alarm. Everything he said to me that night in his cottage bears this out and he confessed, when he wrote to me, that——"

"He wrote to you, Peter ?"

"Yes. Good God, Zinnia, I didn't know, until I got to the office and found your letter waiting, that you were here. I thought you were in Connecticut. It flashed across me that it was my fault that you had put yourself in a position of possible danger and I had already decided to make a quick trip, when Overton's letter came on the next mail, and by a curious coincidence, less than an hour after, Giles Landless himself stalked into my office."

"Landless !" I seemed to be repeating helplessly. "Was it he I saw with you and Wiggar and the doctor this afternoon ?"

"That's right." Peter nodded. "He's given up hermiting for good and is ready, if necessary, to be the king-pin in the evidence."

I think the storm must have begun to abate about that time, but I was too excited to notice. I said, "Then Jared did set fire to his hut ! Oh, Peter, how horrible !"

"Hideous isn't too strong a word. Imagine, Zinnia! It wasn't until the flames were beyond control that Landless wakened. He grabbed some clothes and a suitcase he always kept ready-packed and dashed out. It was very dark except right there in the gully and he saw no one. Only tracks in the snow. They were all around the cabin. He could smell kerosene and saw places where stuff had been piled and ignited. There was even one heap of kindling that hadn't caught very well. He kicked it away from the wall. One piece was a charred end turned over and he saw an express tag nailed fast to it. The crate of which it had been a part must have been chopped up some time before, for the ink of the address was faded. Not so much so, however, but that he could make out the name: Jared Rolf, Abbotsville, Maine. You may imagine some of his feelings when he saw that!

"Landless was dressed and ready to move on before he had quite decided what to do. He realized that Rolf had tried to kill him and would try again unless it was made to appear that this attempt had been successful and that he had died in the flames. His own disappearance would be the best possible proof and so, sticking the piece of charred wood in his pocket, he made off through trails familiar only to himself.

"Where he went after that I don't know." Peter's tense voice could just be heard above the continued low swish of the rainy wind against the small panes of the window. "He had been in some kind of trouble; I didn't like to ask him what it was. In the midst of clearing it up he had to stop over one night in New York and, on an impulse, came in to ask my advice. It seems that he was hanging between two horns of a dilemma. Mary Rolf had been good to him; so good that he would sacrifice a great deal rather than cause her any trouble. He wasn't sure what it would mean to her to have her husband accused of murder and he wasn't positive about the value of the evidence in his possession."

"You mean the label on the kindling?" I asked eagerly.

"That," Peter answered, "and the fact that Giles Landless knew that Jared's boat was the only one on the lake the night Goodhue was killed. Not only that, but he saw it come out from behind the point and was near enough to recognize Jared at the tiller. . . .

"You remember, Zinnia, that they were all present out on the ice the morning after Goodhue's death when I outlined my idea of how the crime was committed. Giles believed I was right and Jared knew it. It was then, or shortly afterward, that the murderer must have made up his mind to get rid of the hermit. The attempt to do so was a stupid and clumsy crime, but killers are not usually the most intelligent of human beings."

"Jared is crafty," I said thoughtfully, "but he's slow-witted. Was he capable, do you think, of planning to kill Goodhue by such an unusual method?"

"No," Peter replied. "I think it was just a spurt of vengeful instinct. He was mad about Constance Dangerfield; clean off his head. Did I tell you about how he came to Goodhue's the night of the studio party? Yes. Well, I thought he took too much interest even then and that it was odd Mary had sent him to bring the girl home. Afterward I concluded from something she said that she knew very well Tom had gone and wouldn't have thought of suggesting it to Jared. That, in itself, was something to think over when I had the time."

"I see, Peter. Yes, I see that. But go back to the night Goodhue died. Something happened between Connie and him that evening. Do you think Jared was a witness—or guessed——?"

"I'm sure of it." The reply was unequivocal. "He knew what was going on and it roused every evil passion in his abnormal brain. I think the whole situation came to a head when the painter and the girl got in-shore. At any rate, Jared was waiting and watching, hidden somewhere near, and saw enough to send him into a state of fury almost beyond control when Goodhue started back across the ice. From here on we're dealing with instincts, not with reasoned thoughts. . . . There was the ice boat ready to hand, so swift, so silent. Some idea of avenging his defeat at the recent races the day before may have suggested its use. Who was a more skilful sailor than himself . . . Jared Rolf? he would ask and now he would prove it. See how quickly he could follow, pointing close every time he came about. On every tack his quarry would have been in plain view and could have been warned by the police whistle he was known to carry whenever he went sailing. But by keeping to the smooth ice he knew he could approach without a sound that could possibly reach the muffled ears of the libertine ahead.

"Jared knew every inch of the course his prey would take. Could hold off until the exact minute when the most dangerous spot would be reached. There were the little bushes of balsam, black against the snow, the red sign in their midst; and when they came in line with Goodhue's boat-house. . . .

"A quick swing of the tiller, a sharp turn across the wind, the well-calculated hike of the runner plank, one swift instant of madly perfect steering, and it was all over. . . . Nothing to do then, but to come on around and romp home before the wind."

I shivered as if that same icy breeze was blowing through the room. Peter's low voice hurried on.

"I think Jared must have been filled to bursting with a sense of his own cleverness and power. All the scores chalked up against Goodhue probably for years settled at last! He could now stalk Connie at his leisure since the only rival he had wit enough at that time to recognize was out of the way for ever. Drowned, as others had been drowned before in that same treacherous spot. No one would guess that it wasn't an accident. Even when he saw the

hermit that night he wasn't especially frightened, for there had been no breath of reason to cool his elation. It wasn't until the next morning when——"

There was a loud knocking on the outer door. Peter broke off and sprang to open it. The rain blew in but the wind was dying. The police that Peter had summoned by phone a half-hour before were at the door.

EPILOGUE

IT was a lovely evening in mid-July. We had hurried back from the wedding in time to change and get out on the lake for a try at the bass, Peter Clancy and I. He had been able to wangle a couple of days off and we had driven up from Wolcott Street to see Tom and Connie Dangerfield married that afternoon.

"Wasn't it hot in the church!" Peter backed on the oars lazily so that I might fish from the stern of the boat. I got out a nice fifty-yard cast which I think he pretended not to notice.

"I told you last winter that it was sometimes hotter in Abbotsville than it is in Florida," I returned, beginning to strip in my line.

"Don't you think it's rather sissy to fish with bait?" he ignored my remark.

"Not for these blacks. It's your only chance in this warm weather. You couldn't get one to look twice at a fly."

"I don't see that they're even risking one eye at that minnow you're wearing out," Peter retorted.

It was painfully true. We had been out over an hour in the growing dusk without one real strike. Arnold had said, at dinner, that the water was too warm and that we wouldn't have any luck. He and Louise were out trolling down the deep water in the middle of the lake. But neither Peter nor I care much for that kind of sport.

"They seem very happy now." Peter indicated the distant boat with a flick of his gay red head. "And Max is a different person altogether. Is it the prospect of being a father, do you suppose, Zinnia?"

"He was headed right before that," I said, remembering. "By the way, there's something I always meant to ask you, Peter, about that first misunderstanding between Arnold and Louise. You thought that Donald Goodhue answered the old pawnbroker's description of the man who brought him Louise's jewels. That fooled you, as well as Arnold, didn't it?"

Peter watched me make another cast before he said: "Yes—and no. Yes is right for the first time I saw Goodhue. But after that morning when I posed for him in his studio I felt that the last disguise the man would think of or tolerate would be that of a typical artist of the gay nineties. Every up-to-date instinct would have rebelled. He would have selected any kind of a make-up rather than that. And because the actual disguise was put on by an actor it was so good that old Isaac had no idea it was one. An amateur would have found it very hard to fool that cagey old bird." Peter had almost forgotten to row. "Of course I knew Goodhue wouldn't baulk at blackmail. But the guise poor Reggie Star assumed would never have been a modern painter's dish of tea."

"You heard that Reggie died, after all?" I said softly. "Louise would never have forgiven herself if she hadn't given him that one last chance."

Peter nodded. "A lovely woman." He sighed. "Why are all the lovely women either married—or blind to my undoubted attractions, Zinnia, my pet ?"

I began to reel in. "Perhaps they think it's manners to wait to hear a tender 'wilt thou be mine ?' " I grinned down at him. "You fish awhile, Peter. I'll row."

He didn't move. "I'm no more energetic than the fish." He merely twiddled the oars in the pale saffron surface of the dusky water. "Let's just drift, and watch the scenery go slowly by."

Most of my line was in already. I let the bait dangle a little way astern and sat down facing Peter. It was very pleasant to be here in these lovely surroundings, after the drive up, and the pretty little wedding in the old Revolutionary church in Fairview. . . .

"Did you ever see anything as beautiful as the expression on Tom's face ?" I murmured, remembering aloud.

"I thought the bride was prettier," Peter observed in the same key.

"Prettier, perhaps, but not more ecstatic." I smiled back. "Doctor Overton seemed proud to give her away. He looks fine, Peter."

"Yes, my dear. We can be glad we had our little part in getting things cleared up for him professionally. The medical authorities aren't as stony hearted as one might have been led to believe and after all, but for one thing, he was a shining light in his own field."

"You don't think he'll ever drink again, Peter ?"

"There's no telling, I suppose," he replied soberly. "I imagine he doesn't quite trust himself—yet. He wants to stay here, at least for the present, and do what he can to serve those who otherwise wouldn't get proper care. He has many friends. I think it's a very good plan."

"What's going to happen to the hermit, now ? Have you any idea, Peter ?"

"Looked picturesque in his leather clothes there in the church." The oars dipped very softly. "He's gone back to his old habits that far, but he's having his meals regularly and helps Mary out with the dairy work at the farm, I understand. . . ."

"That seems like a practical arrangement." I looked up into the clear sky where the evening star bloomed softly at the very top of a pointed spruce. There was a long silence in which my thoughts went back to another night when the trees above us were swaying palms, the same star burned with even greater brilliance above the purple waters of the gulf, and slowly all the events that followed began to pass in orderly sequence through my mind. I was nearing the end when Peter's quiet voice brought me back to the present.

"There's something I've wanted to ask you, Zinnia, ever since the night when Jared was lost."

"Yes, Peter ?"

"It was two days before they found his body."

"Yes. I know. The police had given up, but Uncle Joe went

on with the search. They thought Jared might have escaped, but that old man didn't underestimate what the wind could do when it got loose in his desert."

"And Mary," Peter said in a very low voice, "didn't Mary know, also ?"

I didn't answer. I had wondered, too. . . . Peter's tone was insistent. He said : "Mary crashed into that dead tree on purpose, didn't she, Zinnia ? You told me once that she was an expert and very careful driver. The headlights of her car were working all right even afterward. She would have been obliged to stop a little farther on because of the sand, but there was plenty of traction at that point. I looked it over the next day. I couldn't see any reason why she should have hit the tree. Unless——"

He waited for me to say something, but I couldn't. I remembered that strange moment of what almost looked like panic and Mary's words seemed still to be ringing in my ears : "Jared was—a murderer ?" . . .

I believe Peter's thoughts were running a swift parallel to mine. He asked another question. "Was Jared familiar with that place, Zinnia ?"

I shook my head. "He and Mary's uncle never got on. I doubt if he'd ever seen the Desert more than a few times when he was young."

"Then he would have considered it a good place for a man to hide from a close pursuit ?"

"I think so, Peter. Yes."

"And it took two days to find him," Peter reiterated slowly. "He was literally engulfed in sand. One arm was broken. They thought he must have gone around in circles, though every track was, of course, obliterated."

I shuddered in the summer heat.

After a minute Peter said : "Did you notice the old Rolf monument in the churchyard when we passed it coming out from the wedding this afternoon ? That was Jared's grave off in the corner of the lot, wasn't it ?"

"The newest one. Yes," I said.

"But there was a big mass of yellow flowers growing on it already. Golden Glow, they're called."

"Yes," I said rather faintly. "Mary transplanted them from the corner of the farmhouse where they were coming up again."

"Jared had cut them down." Peter's face was dim in the fading light. "He hated to have Mary waste her time on anything that didn't bring in money. He hated flowers, too. . . ."

"But flowers on a grave," I said rather desperately, "might be a sign of forgiveness."

"I wonder——" Peter's voice sank to silence.

And that is one thing to which Peter Clancy never found an answer.

THE END